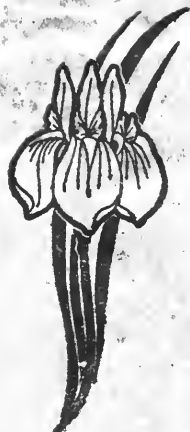


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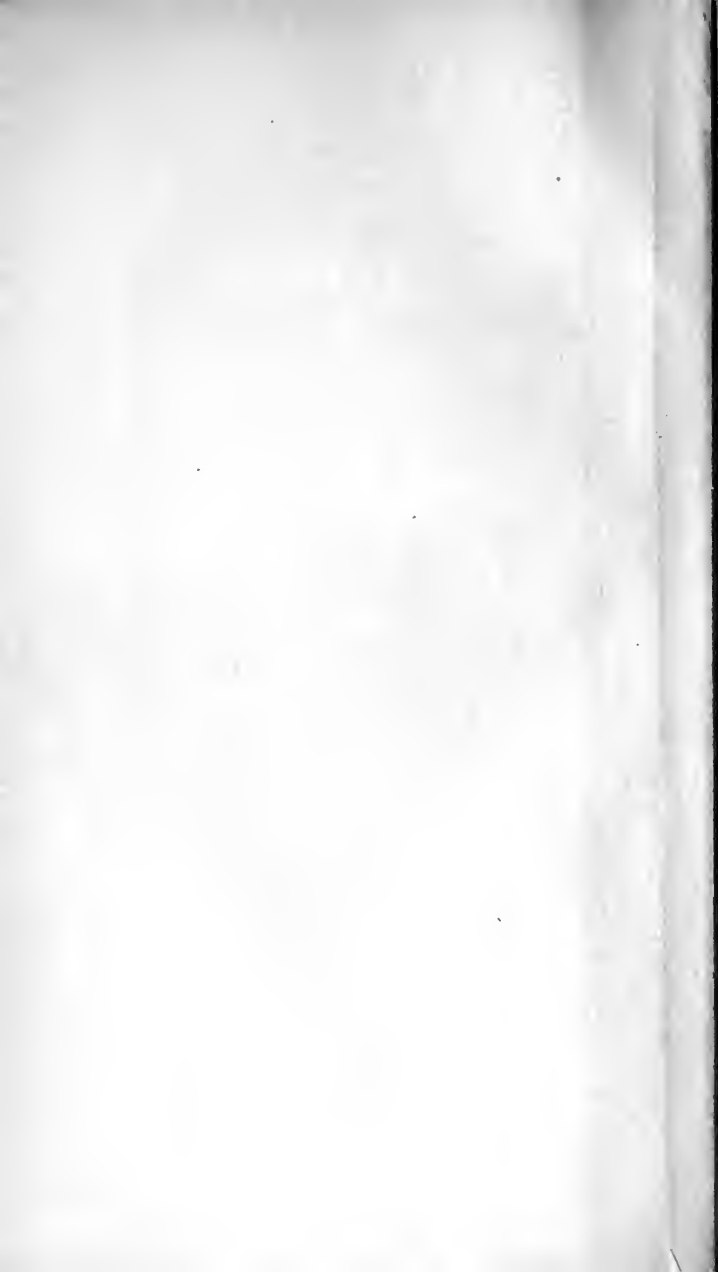
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In
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In Buncombe County

CHAPTER I

Waiting for Alick

WE were waiting for a boy; at least, we had been led to believe it was for that reason we were sitting so long before an open fire in the back part of one of the grocery stores in Asheville Junction, North Carolina. We had arrived in the early morning from Spartanburg. It already began to seem as if it were several mornings ago when we had stepped on the deserted platform. We knew it must be the Swannanoa which was brawling along just the other side of the dismal structure said to be a boarding-house. But it was

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nothing to us, though it were ten times the Swannanoa. It is one of the drawbacks of travel that, when you have gone hundreds of miles to look at some fine scenery, you are in such a state physically that you do not care whether you look at the scenery or not.

While we had stood dejectedly on the platform in the dusk, the conductor had taken pity on us, and, as the train moved on, he had swung forward from the steps and shouted to us to go to the store and see what we could do.

“I suppose,” said Amabel, “that the conductor meant well; still, what do you think he thought we could do at the store? What do you advise that we should try to do there? I don’t feel, just at present, as if there were any employment suitable for me in a North Carolina grocery-store.”

Of course, there were no friends to meet us. We were alone on the platform,—alone, save that we seemed to be eternally accompanied by the heaviest kind of satchels. We also had a redbird, which Amabel was bringing up from Florida to the friend to whom we were now going. So powerful is the effect of the mind upon the body, that we would unhesitatingly have affirmed that we had been travelling without pause with a redbird in a cage for several weeks. If we had not had so many satchels we might have done very well with the cage ; or if we had not had the cage we might have been more comfortable with the satchels. But we had all, and I am sure that we had never quelled so much profanity in an equal number of hours as we quelled in the hours that had elapsed since we left Jacksonville.

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I said there were no friends to meet us, for they must by this time be quite bewildered as to the hour of our arrival. We had come by way of Atlanta, and when we reached that city it was told to us that the train from Florida, in which we had just arrived, had been known to connect with the North-going express, as it was advertised to do, but that such occasions were very rare indeed. Two or three men, who had been on the same car with us, and who had thus missed business appointments, swore refreshingly and uttered dreadful threats against the corporation. Like that sanguinary creature of old who wished that the inhabitants of a certain part of the world had but one neck, that he might sever it at a blow, so these gentlemen wished about the corporation. We could not openly join in this bloodthirsty desire, but I think our silent

wishes were as powerful as the loudly-expressed invectives.

No, there was no one to meet us, for we had been expected twelve hours ago. We could not blame the most loyal of friends for not standing twelve hours on the platform where we shivered. No one but a lover would have been devoted enough for such waiting.

After some consultation, not a human being in sight, we obeyed the conductor's suggestion. We stumbled along with our heavy bags and our bird-cage, seeing that the mountains were round about us and asking ourselves if we should ever have the slightest feeling for them. I am tempted to advise any one who wishes to preserve intact the sensitive admiration for scenery not to travel with a redbird in a cage. The effect of such a combination is stultifying. You don't care for the

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most wonderful effect of mountain and valley; you can't get your mind from the bird and the cage ; and, what is far worse, after a short time you cease to wish you could admire something. You sink down to an abnormal level, like the woman in "Locksley Hall." If you are in a crowd, as one so often is when travelling, you have to fight madly in order to maintain room for the cage. Men and women who have no bird-cages, and who jostle up against you, look at you so savagely that you feel like an outcast, and wish for a desert that should be large enough for self and cage. I have travelled with a puppy and I have travelled with a bird, and I infinitely prefer the puppy.

The storekeeper was sandy and bland, and was sprinkling the floor preparatory to sweeping. He smiled cordially, and led us to the rear of hogsheads of molasses

and piles of calico and seated us before a fire, to which directly came a half-grown negro and leaned up against the wall on the other side of the fireplace.

Within ten minutes the negro had almost fallen into the fire for the second time. Each time, in staggering up to his feet, he had scattered the coals all about the hearth. He had stared at us with such a dull persistence that he had fallen asleep. We were not used to seeing a negro sleep standing, and it seemed to us a very dangerous thing to indulge in erect somnolence so very near such a large fire, but nobody did anything about it, save to laugh. Each time the darkey sheepishly gathered himself up, grinned round in a general way, then went to sleep again.

It was at this time that we began to wait for the boy.

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The storekeeper went immediately through a back way. He soon returned, saying he had sent for a boy named Alick, who had quite a good horse and a very good surrey, and this boy would take us out to our friend's house, which was not more than two miles away. He further informed us that they 'most always gave such odd jobs to Alick, because his father had broken his leg, and because he had quite a good horse and a very good surrey. He 'd be 'round right soon, and we could set and rest ourselves until he came. The storekeeper reckoned we must be tired, and he said we were welcome to set there's long's we wished. He went further, and hinted that he liked to have us there.

As the boy was coming so soon, we tried not to remember how faint we were; and it seemed hardly worth while to go

over to that boarding-house which stood on the banks of the Swannanoa and get some breakfast.

Being where we were, the storekeeper conceived that it was his duty to entertain us. He gave a full and careful history of two hunting dogs he had lately owned. One had been accidentally shot by a very honorable young man, who, though he might have hidden his part in the accident foreverlastin'ly, yet came forward and told what he had done, an' handed out a \$5 bill on the spot. The narrator called that mighty square. The squareness and the honorableness had made a great impression. He talked fully half an hour on the subject. At the end he said:

“This feller was the dog,” as a fine pointer came sauntering up to our group.

“He is n't dead, then?” I exclaimed, in great surprise.

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“Law, no. He was only wounded. Jim, can’t yer wake up now, an’ see ef Alick’s in sight?”

The negro went laboriously to the door, and soon came back in the same way to announce that the road was as bare as the back of his hand. I involuntarily looked at the back of his hand, to see how bare the highway really was. Then I knew that Alick could not be visible from that door.

An hour passed on. The darkey woke again, and this time in his struggles not to fall face downward into the fire he sent a large, red-hot coal on to a fold of Amabel’s skirt, which began to smoke ominously.

When the little excitement concerning this incident was over, the storekeeper, who had been selling some bacon, came

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back to tell us that it was not possible for the boy to be much longer, as he only lived a piece up to the east. As his father had a broken leg they almost always gave him these odd jobs.

We were now so hungry and exhausted that we said we would go over to the place they called a boarding-house, and see if we could get some breakfast. Before going, we begged the man to keep the boy whose father had a broken leg, and who had quite a good horse and a very good surrey, until we came back, in case he should arrive during our absence. He faithfully promised to do so, and we departed.

We were so late for breakfast that the fried chicken and fried beef were firmly imbedded in the cold lard in which they had been cooked. I do not mean that the fat was cold during the process of

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cooking, but it was now. I never was "fond" of cold lard, either as a food or for any purpose whatsoever. I had apple-butter and saleratus biscuit for my repast. I know they were saleratus biscuit because frequent yellow lumps appealed both to the eye and palate. But I am not complaining. I knew that the apple-butter would not hurt me, and I was just as sure that, at one meal, I could not eat enough sal-soda to destroy the coats of my stomach.

Amabel reproved me for not drinking the coffee. She said the imbibing it had given her a new sensation, and she thought it would have had the same effect upon me. I did not ask her to explain her ambiguous remark. I had seen and smelled the beverage, and to see and to smell was enough.

The girl who shoved the things at us

while we were at the breakfast table, and pressed us to eat, informed us that Mr. Ayer's house, where we hoped to go, was a "mighty long four miles, ef it war a rod," and she asked if "we war a reckonin' ter be took 'long by Alick."

We said we had been reckoning so for some hours. She nodded and remarked that "they gen'ly give such jobs ter Alick, 'cause his father had broke his leg."

To this Amabel made response that, if having a father with a broken leg were Alick's chief recommendation, she almost wished we were waiting for another boy. "However," she concluded, "I don't suppose it makes the least difference what kind of a boy we have, so long as we don't really have him."

The boarding-house was not ornate. It had very rough floors, but it was a

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plank house and was two-storied. The sitting-room was also a bedroom, to the extent of having three beds in it. Our visit was so early that these beds were still dishevelled. It had an open fire, and we sat by it while they warmed over the coffee before we went to the table. There was a great dejection and dinginess to our eyes about everything, but there was a certain heartiness and kindness in the greeting we had from the people.

When we went out-of-doors after our meal we found that the heir of the boarding-house, together with a young and frisky red setter, was preparing to launch a small raft on the bosom of the Swannanoa. The boy said that he had just been across the road to the store, and that Alick had not come yet. He furthermore confided to us his conviction that Alick was so lazy he "could n't but jest eat his victuals, an'

CHAPTER II

More Waiting for Alick

A FEW customers loitered in as the forenoon wore on, and somebody came to inquire for a letter (for here is the post-office), named Best.

We were left much to ourselves, and I went to sleep in my chair and dreamed that I fell from my seat directly across the andirons, like a forestick. When I awoke I forgave the negro for having gone to sleep standing. The redbird fluttered a good deal, and once, when we were not looking, a cat tipped over the cage, the door flew open and the bird flew out. Our host was prompt in

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his action. He was standing by the outer door and he banged it shut, after having first dexterously kicked the cat out of it. Then we all set to work to catch the bird. But this is one of the feats of human intelligence and agility which cannot be described. We caught the bird after half-an-hour, during which time all customers were barred from the store, and all persons prevented from inquiring for letters at the post-office. Naturally we made a good deal of noise in our rushes here and there in the room, and we knocked down a great many things, some of which would bear knocking down, as rolls of jean, and some would not bear it, as piles of coarse crockery and several lamps. We must have made strange sounds, and these sounds, together with the fact of the door's being bolted, very reasonably at-

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tracted anybody, white or black, who was anywhere in the vicinity. As I was darting round the place in pursuit I became irritatingly conscious that a number of boys and three grown men were holding on by the high window-casing in some way and gazing through the glass absorbedly. I knew also that they occasionally gave details of what they saw to people below them, who heard but could not see. Sometimes a boy emitted a sharp, prolonged yell after one of us had made a particularly wonderful lurch. I learned later that not one of the spectators happened to see the bird, and so they had no way of accounting for the antics they were witnessing. They simply knew that two unknown women had arrived by train from Spartanburg, had gone to this store, and that the storekeeper had fastened the building

previous to a combined attempt on his part and on the part of the unknown women to climb up the walls of the store.

When the bird was in its cage again our host flung open the door. There immediately entered a large man, who looked sharply at our red and perspiring faces. Behind was a small crowd of blacks and whites. Among them I recognized all the people I had seen at the boarding-house, and I never saw such horror upon any countenances as was upon theirs. I knew that they were thinking with terror that we had been beneath their roof, and with thankfulness that we were not there now.

The large man said pompously that he was afraid we had been very near disturbing the peace, and he sincerely hoped we would not do it any more. The

storekeeper looked confused, but he tried to take the matter jocularly, and replied that he hoped so too, but that folks had to make some kind of a row when they were chasin' after a cussed redbird.

The large man repeated the words: "Redbird? Chasin'?" in a voice rather incredulous, and looked scrutinizingly about him. The crowd which was filling the store also stared with the same incredulity, and with faces that were gradually growing disappointed. A woman in a very deep cape bonnet, — a bonnet which makes a face look as if it were at the far end of a cavern, — pushed her way up to the spokesman and said something to him. He coughed and hesitated, but at length, looking severely at the storekeeper, he said that an esteemed fellow-townswoman had suggested to him that at least one of the strangers now present

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was a maniac ; that she had escaped from an asylum in Spartanburg, and that it was dangerous to the public welfare to allow her to be at large.

“ In fact,” he said, suddenly relapsing into a conversational tone, “ Mrs. Williams here says her boy saw one of these ladies go up the side of the house in a way beyond any one but a crazy woman.”

“ Oh, squire, that’s all bosh,” returned our host and protector. “ If you’ve ever tried ter ketch a bird, you know you don’t move’s ef you was a-walkin’ inter church.”

There was the bird in its cage, looking tired and conquered. It seemed to be a piece of circumstantial evidence that had great weight with the people now present, but it was evident that they were sorry to give up the belief that a fe-

male maniac, — possibly two of them, — had besieged this portion of Asheville Junction.

While the assembly was dispersing, with many suspicious looks back at us, some one announced that Alick was in sight.

We hurried to the door, to see a rattling surrey drawing near. The vehicle contained a boy who was leaning forward and lashing the horse. It turned out that the delay, at which no one wondered, had been caused by the discovery, at the moment of harnessing, that the rim of one of the hind wheels was so nearly detached that even a North Carolina boy could not think of starting with it in that condition. The wheel had been without a tire for some time previous.

Alick had taken off the rim completely before leaving home. He explained to

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us that the process had been a longer job than he had expected, for, though most of the spokes had been "loose as water," some of them had "stuck so's he reckoned he never should git 'em pounded off. But he had, an' he made no doubt but we mought git ter Mr. Ayer's jist as the surrey was. He had ben reckonin' a heap er times ter git a tire on, but he was so hurried he had n't had no chance."

So we went thumping along over the wet State road. The wheel that had no rim was on the side where Amabel sat; and she said she was so absorbed in watching the spokes come round and in wondering why they did not fall out, that she had no thought for the beauty of the country.

Alick was alone on the front seat; he was occupied in whacking the horse and

in pulling on the lines. He was about thirteen, and looked as if he had worked too hard, and as if life were rather a tough thing for him. I doubt if he had ever really known that the mountains were about his home. How could he know that he lived in the midst of a beauty so great that men and women gladly travelled hundreds of miles just to look upon it? The hills stood, the streams rushed, — what did he care? After a long silence, during which we gazed at the encircling mountains, at the rising and falling stretches of “old fields” that are good for the eye, if not for agriculture, at all the new and beautiful aspects which nature wears here, we turned again to our driver.

We began to question him. We asked him about his horse, which he said cost his father two hundred dollars, but was

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worth three hundred. From that moment I am grieved to say that we suspected every word that Alick said. It soon, to our deep anxiety, began to be borne in upon us that he did not know the way to Mr. Ayer's. He informed us that Mr. Ayer lived five miles away, in Limestone Township. Thus far, no two persons had agreed about the distance. Alick asserted stoutly that he knew "iv'ry inch," and that you could n't "fule him on these yer roads."

But when we left the public highway and entered one of the paths that twist and intersect among the woods on these mountain slopes, we almost gave up all hope of reaching anywhere.

Every few moments Alick would turn into another cartway, lashing and pounding along over the dreadful paths.

After a while, as the mountain grew

steeper and we seemed to be getting nowhere, we fancied that our driver began to look anxious. Twice he had taken what he acknowledged must be the wrong path, and was obliged to back out. Backing out of a very narrow, deep-rutted way, in a wagon whose wheels are not all provided with rims, and on a precipitous slope of the great Appalachian range, is not conducive to calmness of mind.

When we questioned our guide and driver concerning this often-repeated process, he explained that he did it "'cos thur 'd ben so many roads shet urp sence he was thur last."

In truth, we had passed many openings across which landowners had thrown large pine branches to signify that they, the owners, were tired of allowing this particular portion of their property to be travelled over.

At last we came out to a clearing where was a log cabin, with a woman chopping wood and smoking in front of it. We insisted that the woman should be asked to tell if she knew where Mr. Ayer lived. She leaned on her axe handle for some time looking at us before she said : —

“Naw ; I d’ know. Reckon my ole man ’ll know.” She raised her voice and shouted : —

“Brit ! I say ! Hyar’s women !” Perhaps she knew the quickest way to bring “Brit” to the surface. A big fellow slouched into dusky view from the interior of the cabin. He, too, was smoking. He held negligently across his left arm a few-months-old baby, which stared, and drooled, and gurgled.

“Whar be ye gwineter ?” asked this man.

We told him where we wanted to go. With his disengaged arm he gave a prodigious sweep, which included the whole country to the north of us.

“That-a-way,” he said, and sat down in the door of the cabin, so that he might gaze at us more at his ease.

Alick backed and turned and twisted, and got the horse’s head round in a different direction. In this proceeding one spoke came from the rimless wheel, and he climbed out and secured it.

We informed him with severity that we were sorry he had undertaken to convey us to Mr. Ayer’s when he did not know the way. We should probably be lost on the mountain for days and days, if not for the rest of our lives, and he would be responsible. We should try and bear it, but it was a hard fate for him, young as he was.

He turned squarely round on us, his face red and his lip quivering, as if he were going to cry.

“What kinder slops be yer a talkin’?” he cried out fiercely. “I ain’t lost. We ain’t fules, I reckon. Anyways, my hoss ain’t er fule. Ef I let him go, he’d take us back ter the Junction any time.”

“But we don’t want to go to the Junction,” said Amabel. “If we did that we should only have to wait again for you to take us to Mr. Ayer’s, and another rim might come off; or you might break your leg; or we might break our legs; and you don’t know the way, and you can’t find it either. So don’t take us back to the Junction to begin this thing all over again. There is no one there who can take us.”

“I dew know thur way, too!” said

Alick, with an explosive sob. "I dew know it! But the durn folkse hes be'n an' stopped urp thur roads so, durn it!"

"Yes," said Amabel, relentlessly, "and if we don't get to Mr. Ayer's soon, the folks will have time enough to stop up all the roads there are on this mountain."

Alick muttered that "he 'd be durn'd ef he wouldn't let his hoss go home 'fore he 'd stay much longer on that thur mounting."

CHAPTER III

On a North Carolina Mountain

THERE was a time when I considered it would be a very romantic thing to be lost on a mountain. Think of the grandeur and sublimity! Think of the heroic devotion of the lover, who is necessarily always lost with you, if you are a woman. He shelters you with his coat, not minding the cold himself. He always has matches on his person, and when darkness has come down, and it is useless to try to find your way any more, the lover — he has not yet declared himself, but he will — gathers branches of trees and sets fire to them. When the

cheerful fire blazes up, and makes the usual Rembrandt lights and shades, he throws himself at your feet, and you are both silent for a short time. The silence is full of a strange and subtle sweetness, and of heart-beats. He is in his shirt-sleeves because you have his coat, but his dark face and picturesque moustache seem even more attractive than they had been when you last saw him in evening dress, and waltzed with him. The strains of that last "valse of Von Weber" come back to you, together with the memory of the blonde girl in blue, who made such a bold, dead set at the man at your feet. At thought of her, your face hardens. He looks up at you, tossing his dark hair from his forehead with that gesture you have learned to love.

The above paragraph will give a hint of the way I had always intended to be

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lost on a mountain ; it is, I am sure, the only proper way for a woman to be lost — the only womanly way.

Instead, however, of any such experience befalling Amabel and me, here we were in broad daylight in a surrey going partially on spokes, a horse said to be worth three hundred dollars, and a boy who was not worth a cent, and who was now so bewildered, that he had ceased even to “dum the folkses as had stopped up all their dum roads.”

Alick had lost all his confidence and appearance of knowledge. He had even ceased to whack at his horse with his stump of a whip. After we had left the cabin where we inquired for Mr. Ayer's house, Alick had huddled forward on his seat, and had said “dunno” to everything we asked him. Once he had tried to explain to us that if we “had n't er been

in sich a hurry when he started, he should er had more wits 'bout him now, he reckoned."

We felt this to be hard to bear, coming from one who had kept us waiting nearly five hours in a grocery store. In addition to our other comforts while lost on the mountain, we must not forget the red-bird. He was with us. Also his cage. Every time the carriage lurched this side or that, which was every moment, the cage must be kept from too violent a movement. Amabel confessed that life seemed too precious to be devoted entirely to a bird-cage. But as she had brought the bird so far and endured so much for it, it did seem too bad to give it up just as we were so near Mr. Ayer's.

Here she interrupted herself, to say that perhaps we had entirely mistaken the range of mountains among which our

friends dwelt. She asked Alick how many ranges of mountains there were in North Carolina. The question plunged the boy into the most pitiable confusion. He gave it as his opinion that there were millions of um ; but he would n't care ef thur war, ef he only did n't lose "all his spokes." He avowed that if it had n't ben for thum spokes, a kinder breshin' an' thumpin' on thur ground, he should er ben clearer in his mind somehow, an' should n't er got lost.

"Then you own you are lost," said Amabel. "That is a satisfaction, any way ; for we've known it for an hour. What will be our ultimate fate, do you think."

This last question was directed to me. As it was put, the horse suddenly stood still, for the twentieth time, before a pile of young felled pines which "shet urp"

a road, lying directly across it. We were so shut in by the woods on the mountain side that we could only occasionally have glimpses of heights rising beyond, or of the deeps of narrow valleys, where streams rushed foaming.

It was impossible to guess what would be our ultimate fate. Alick was blubbering softly to himself and muttering about spokes. The redbird was fluttering madly. It was a fitting moment for a rescue from some source. But it is a curious and sad fact that only in stories is the rescue effected at the proper time. Alick whined out the remark that "he did n't know as his hoss could find the way back to the Junction, now, 'cos we 'd ben er makin' him go on so."

We thought of the Junction boarding-house. Was it possible that we should be obliged, when night came, to occupy

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one of the beds in the Junction general sitting-room ?

“I guess,” said Amabel desperately, “that you may take the horse out of the shafts, Alick, and ride him home. But leave us the wagon. We will camp out in it. We will set snares and catch our food, which we will eat raw. We can’t go back to the Junction, because if we do we can never leave it. We will dwell here, near to Nature’s heart. Go, Alick, but leave us the surrey. If in future years any one should inquire what was our fate, say nothing. Let a veil of silence drop between us and posterity. I don’t know how long we can live on raw rabbits and squirrels without salt. I don’t even know whether corset lacings will make good snares. When we die, I hope we may die in sight of Mount Pisgah. Go, Alick.”

The boy stared stupidly. He did, however, catch the idea of riding home. He said he was durn'd ef he did n't think he 'd go. He 'd git some men ter come after us. He 'd git um right yer, right soon, too. When we asked him how he could find his way back to us, he began to assert himself again, with the bullying air of a boy.

Should we let him go? I looked at Amabel's strained and anxious face. She said she believed the carriage would be wanted; she believed in time somebody would come. And we might be very near a house without knowing it. These roads led to farms.

Meanwhile Alick had scrambled out and was feverishly taking the "gears" from the horse. He did not speak. He wanted to get away. And he went. We saw him go, and saw that he let the horse take its own course.

After that we sat silently, the bird frisking as if in great joy. It was trying to see the joy of that bird.

The sun came round in front of us, and we became very hungry. But we were not yet ready to set snares. Somehow snares did not seem available when we looked down the vast slope of the mountain at our left.

At the end of two hours, as we were looking thus, we saw something that roused us greatly. It was a horse carrying what we decided to be a woman on its back. It was slowly climbing toward us. We were out of the carriage, for we had been exploring as far in every direction as we dared to go, without finding anything. We were at some distance from our vehicle and we stood still, watching. The steed was a "clay bank," and it was certainly a woman on him ; a woman

sitting on a man's saddle, wearing a bright pink sun bonnet and, for the rest, in a very ragged condition. She had in front of her, and apparently laid across the horse's neck, some kind of a bundle from which faint cries occasionally issued. Every time the bundle cried the woman gave it a little slap.

As long as this fair equestrienne continued to come toward us we would not call to her. We remained quiet, watching to see the effect on her of a surrey found in the wilderness. She came directly upon the carriage before she saw it, for a cape bonnet performs for its wearer the same office which blinders perform for a horse. The clay bank was pulled up shortly from its melancholy walk. Its rider said "Law me!" and remained motionless, gazing. A faint wail and a futile movement of the bundle in front

roused her to a more vigorous slap. Then she drew her foot from the loop in the strap which had served her for a stirrup and slipped to the ground. She lifted the shabby bundle down and put it on the ground at the root of a tree. She shook it impatiently as she did so, and said drawlingly, "Thur, yo' sullen heifer, yo' jis' lay thur, will yo'?"

The child sobbed, but remained quiet. The woman slouched up to the carriage, while the horse had immediately begun cropping what green leaves it could find. She pushed back her bonnet. We saw a bony face, yellow, with thin-lipped, lascivious mouth drooling a brown liquid which had gone down each side of the chin and had made dark smooches on her wrinkled throat. The throat and bosom were uncovered, for the fastenings of the upper part of the dress had gone. A fragment

of a shawl had been pinned over the shoulders, but when she had dismounted this had become displaced.

She leaned on the wheel nearest her and gazed at the carriage and its contents. Satchels and shawls and bird-cage were there. After a long gaze she turned her head slightly and spat. Then she said "Law me !" again, this time with a slight show of animation. Her sunken eyes had a dull gleam in them as she reached forth a dingy, corded hand and took one of the shawls.

We now thought it was time to advance. We walked forward noisily among the leaves and branches. She dropped the shawl and turned toward us, composedly staring, her bonnet pushed back, revealing locks of inky black hair, straying roughly.

When we reached the side of the surrey she said "Howdy," and with her

tongue rolled something from its resting-place beneath her under lip, to some other position in her mouth.

After a moment's hesitation we said "Howdy," also, and then waited. She leaned on the wheel, and continued her observation of us, with such calmness and such unswerving intentness, that I was fast becoming rigid. To try if I could make a movement I pinched Amabel's arm, and she responded in kind. Somebody must speak or I felt that we might become enchanted. I was beginning to think that anything was possible among these mountains. To our great surprise the woman spoke first. She said it was a "right pooty evenin'."

Changing her position she lifted a foot and rested it on the hub of the wheel. Then she asked us if we were "reck'nin' to settle."

Amabel said desperately that she did not know whether we should ever settle or not, but a boy from the Junction had undertaken to drive us to Mr. Ayer's, who lived on a mountain somewhere in Limestone Township, and it had turned out that he did n't know where Mr. Ayer's house was. And we did n't know either. Did she know? The boy had gone back to the Junction; that is, he was going to try to get to the Junction. We thought we should find some one, or some one would come along, even if Alick should not come back.

Then we waited for the woman to speak. She was in no hurry. She took her foot from the hub and put up the other one. Now we noticed that her feet were clad in man's boots very much "shoulded" over at the sides, so that the heels scarcely touched the ground. At

that moment the baby, a few yards away under the tree, stirred and whined. The mother turned her head over her shoulder and said: "Hold your jaw!"

Impossible to tell whether the baby knew the meaning of these words, but it stopped whining.

The woman looked at us and slowly began to speak.

"Thur's a boy ben er comin' fur his eatin's ter my house last week," she said, "he war er plowin' fur the ole Penlands. I reckon he said thur war er man named Ayer summers on this mounting, or on the Busbee. It war er man who had an idee as we-uns did n't plow deep 'nough round hyar. I reckon he's got his head sut onter plowin' deeper hisse'f."

There was so much scorn in the last words, and the speaker, after having

spoken them, ejected tobacco saliva so contemptuously, that we both felt it was a disgrace to us that we had inquired for Mr. Ayer. Still we must persist.

“Then you don’t know where Mr. Ayer lives?” asked Amabel dejectedly.

“Naw.”

A gloomy silence now fell upon us. The stranger occupied it by resuming her dull study of us. The sun was getting nearer the top of a tall mountain in the West. Our hunger was increasing.

“But that boy who was plowing for the Penlands,” exclaimed Amabel eagerly. “He knows where Mr. Ayer’s house is?”

“Yes-um.”

Then if we could see that boy! Only to think that there was a boy who knew where Mr. Ayer lived was like a tonic to us. We asked if this woman would take

us to her house, feed us and shelter us until this precious boy could be produced. To our surprise she not only seemed willing to do so, but she showed some signs of a hospitable feeling. But she warned us that her cabin was "mighty pore." She also made the somewhat ambiguous remark that "she had n't got no old man jis now," and added the information that "hog's my meat an' whiskey's my drink."

But this knowledge could not daunt us. Hog and whiskey looked pleasant to us now. We felt that the sooner we started the better it would be for us. The woman caught the clay bank horse without any difficulty. She said we might either of us ride. But neither my friend nor myself had any confidence in our powers to ride on a man's saddle along the sides of these mountains. The stranger mounted

and asked us to hand up the baby. She then directed that the two satchels be fastened together with one of the reins belonging to the gears Alick had left. Thus fastened they were flung over the horse behind its rider. Amabel carried the bird-cage. So we went slowly and toilsomely down the steepest path I was ever on. Nobody spoke a word. We watched the horse deliberately bracing its front feet with every step it took. We also braced and dug our heels into the soft, dark soil. We went on an hour like this. After a while the path, descending all the time, curved round to the left. On a slope, not so steep as the one we had been descending, but still perilously like the pitch of a house-roof, were a few acres of deadened trees, and in the midst, a log cabin. A spotted black and white dog came gallop-

ing out to greet us. An ash-hopper was at one end of the cabin. There was not a tree, save the spectral dead ones, near.

The woman rode up to the open door and we followed.

“Hyar we be,” she said. She slipped off her horse, pulled the saddle from him and threw it inside the door, then turned the animal loose.

“Ef he gits ter thur roughness I sha’n’t blame him noan,” she remarked. We heard her without in the least knowing what she meant.

Before she removed her sun-bonnet she went to a table in a corner of the room where stood a dish with some cooked fat meat. She cut off a thick slice and gave it into the clutching fingers of her baby. The child took the bacon and began sucking it greedily. It sucked contentedly after it was laid on the bed, which was a sack of straw with some quilts on it.

We sat down on a bench which stood against the wall. There were no chairs, only a stool in front of the fireplace where some logs were burning dully. The wind blew in through the cracks, and soon made us shiver. Besides, the door was open, and it must be open, for there was no other way of admitting light. Of course we had read about these hovels before, but being in one and reading about one are two different experiences. So different, in fact, that I feel that the temptation to go on describing is a temptation to be resisted.

Our hostess had removed her sun-bonnet, showing how full of veins her dingy neck was, and how shrunken. Showing also that, despite her wrinkles and her sallowness, she was not old. She revealed what a woman looks like who works at the plow, who eats hog

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and drinks whiskey, who sucks at a wad of snuff, who is as licentious as the worst women in cities.

It was easy to guess at many of her sins. It was also easy to see that she had the virtue of hospitality. Plainly she enjoyed mixing the corn pone and frying the bacon, and both were soon down on the coals before the fire. She told us she had n't any tea or coffee, but she would steep us some dittany which she considered fully equal to store tea, specially with a "few merlasses inter it."

We ate the pone and bacon and drank the dittany. We ate so much that our hostess once actually smiled, her wide, almost lipless mouth looking strange in the process.

"You-uns war hungry," she said. "I never seen nobody dew much better at eatin's."

CHAPTER IV

Ristus Leads the Way

THE woman who entertained us in her cabin had complimented us on "doin' mighty well at our eatin's," and we deserved the remark. Now that we were no longer hungry, it seemed a mystery that we could have devoured so much "hog and hominy." It was our "sleepin's" that next began to occupy our minds.

The sun was down behind that double mountain which is named the "Twin Brothers"; still we were assured that it would n't be dark "fur quite a spell," and the woman "war lookin' fur Ristus right soon."

But the phrase "right soon" conveyed dismal ideas to us. Had not Alick been promised right soon? Had we come to North Carolina that we might spend our lives in waiting for different boys? What reason had we to hope that Ristus would be more prompt than Alick had been? It was dreadful to have our fate in the hands of a boy named Ristus, who was expected right soon.

But Providence, having frowned, was now about to smile. We were hovering over the fire when our hostess, coming in with a load of wood, remarked as she flung it down, that she "reckoned she seen Ristus er comin' urp the ole field now; but she hoped we could wait till he 'd had his eatin's, fur ole man Penland worked him like er slave."

We went to the door to look for our deliverer. Yes, up the slope, where

young pines were springing, there was something moving slowly. Could that be the boy? It was something which wore a long garment reaching to within a few inches of the ground, so near the ground that the wearer was holding it up in front as he climbed the hill. The head was covered by a sun-bonnet.

The woman stood behind us and she raised her voice and drawled : —

“ Be er pickin’ urp yer needles, Ristus ; here be er job fur yer.”

The object heard the words, it increased its speed, thereby nearly falling into the skirts of the garment.

We now discovered a tall, stalwart boy in an army overcoat, from which the cape had gone. The skirts of the coat were sewed together with twine in front and rear, thus restricting the wearer’s steps to a very short stride indeed. We were

soon convinced that this was the only article of apparel which Ristus wore, if we except his sun-bonnet. He was barefooted. It was a mild day, mild enough to be comfortable without shoes, and to be uncomfortable with an army overcoat on.

When he came still nearer we could see large darns here and there, darns made with twine, not beautiful but effective.

We had a passing glimpse of his face as he went by us into the house, but the sun-bonnet immediately obscured him again. He remained thus covered while he swallowed his supper. Amabel asked him if he knew where Mr. Ayer lived. The sun-bonnet nodded an affirmative. She next inquired if he would guide us there before dark, and there was another nod.

It was, perhaps, something like having an interview with the Man in the Iron Mask. Certainly it was fully as mysterious. The nods had been so reassuring that our spirits began to rise. We felt that it was better to have Ristus whom we could not see, than Alick whom we had seen too much. We began to feel a stimulating effect from the very fact that we could not see him. From the Man in the Iron Mask our thoughts flew to the Veiled Prophet, thence vaguely wandered to the beauties of the East who shroud themselves from vulgar curiosity. We dared not try to get directly in front of Ristus; we thought our motive in so doing would be too apparent. And it is only from the front that the wearer of a sun-bonnet may be seen. Pone and bacon disappeared within the depths of that bonnet, but no sound of

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a voice came from it until the woman asked : —

“Ole Penland ben curtin’ urp rough ter day, Ristus?”

“Torrable rough.”

“Why don’t yer git ketched of him?”

“Carnt.”

After that there was no more conversation, and no sound save the crackling of the fire, and the crunching of Ristus’ teeth on corn bread in the remote depths of the bonnet.

The twilight was coming on. We knew there would be no moon. Again Mr. Ayer’s grew far away. Suddenly, with the effect of stopping in the middle of a meal, the figure fastened into that long robe rose to its feet, and from the sun-bonnet came the words:

“Reckon yo’ ladies ’ll be fur mekin’ er soon start.”

We were instantly on our feet, Amabel with the bird-cage and a satchel, I with more satchels.

· “The sooner the better,” we said eagerly.

But eagerness is thrown away among these people. They are made in a way which makes it impossible for them to understand rapidity of thought or motion. We had supposed Ristus was going to start. Instead, he stood slouching in front of the fire, the strangest combination of the pathetic and the ludicrous in his figure and attitude. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, his head-covering bent toward the blaze, while two very dirty hands were held outward. We remained standing, laden as we were.

“They ’s er waitin’, Ristus,” at last said the woman, “and night ’s er curmin’ on, Ristus.”

I was about to say that the boy started, but that word hints at something more rapid than the movement which propelled him from the fire toward the door, through which could be seen the vast profiles of the mountains, now growing a dark purple against the violet western sky.

He did not turn toward us, but we, thinking he had started for Mr. Ayer's, followed with our impediments. We had not gone many rods before we became painfully aware that the bags were too much for us. We called to our guide. He came, with his head held in such a way that the broad side of his bonnet was presented to us. Without a word he picked up a stick from the path, slung two bags upon it and took the third in his hand, the two swinging from his shoulder. We followed as lightly as possible with our redbird.

The gloom on this wooded mountain path grew rapidly deeper, but our guide strode on without pause. Once, from a side path, a man on horseback came slowly loping. He drew in his rein. "Howdy, Ristus," he said, "what ye got?"

"Women," answered Ristus, and then the horseman went on.

The steeper the way, the easier the boy seemed to go. At length I began to think that something mysterious had secured control of us. We should probably follow in this way along a mountain side all the rest of our lives. It was always to be dim, with glimpses of stars through the trees ; always there would be in front of us a magnified figure in an army overcoat and a cape bonnet. This figure would forever be walking in the same peculiar way, lifting its feet high, because of climbing mountains for years.

For the first time since we had left Asheville Junction, I wished I was back there. I thought with longing of the boarding-house sitting-room and its three beds. We should never see a bed again ; never see any being but the one which we were following — and we had not even seen him.

Amabel managed to ask, breathlessly, “if it was far now?”

“Ruther near,” said the unseen. Did “ruther near” mean a few rods or a few miles?

Suddenly, without the slightest premonitory sign that he was going to speak, Ristus said, with indescribable contempt in his voice :

“Mr. Ayer be er man ez thinks we-uns don’t plow deep enurf. He’s er ben er plowin’ deeper. I reckon his craps ’ll be er sight ; they be er sight, anyhow.”

We could think of nothing to say to this information ; and we had no breath to speak if we could have thought of a suitable reply.

In less than five minutes more we came to a clearing, sloping upward, and at a distance there was the shining of a light as if from a house. A few more steps, and there was a rush of something coming pellmell down the hill toward us, then a barking in several different keys.

Ristus stopped, and we stopped close behind him. There were voices from the direction of the house. The purple lights of the heavens were all gone now. It seemed in the night, but how mild, and yet how exhilarating the air was ? Not like a night in late fall at home.

The boy put his hand to the side of his mouth and shouted : —

“ Dogs bite ? ”

The answer came down, "No; come on."

The same voice called the dogs strenuously, "Buster! Tip! Bull! you rascals!"

The dogs did not obey in the least. They were now dashing around us with such celerity as to seem half a dozen in number. We had recognized Mr. Ayer's voice. In the hurried movement which this recognition stimulated, Amabel fell forward directly on the bird-cage, which yielded in such a way that, for the second time within twenty-four hours, the bird flew out. This time he did not escape into a grocery store, but into the wild woods. I will now finish the history of this particular redbird so far as I know it. We never saw him again. We had brought him up from Florida at the risk of permanently souring the tem-

pers of both of us. During the journey we had sacrificed for him our liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This was the way he rewarded us. He was certainly the most ungrateful redbird with whom I was ever acquainted.

We went on up the hill. When Ristus called out "Thar 's women hyar," we saw a woman join the man, and both hastened down.

Amabel paid Ristus a dollar. She told him she would give him another dollar, if he would go down to the Junction and see that Alick found the way to his surrey. On hearing these words Mr. Ayer inquired if it were Alick's surrey that was standing out there below his potato field. He said it was not customary for him to find a surrey in his woods, but he had found one just before dark. It was dreadful to know after all our suffering

that we had been actually on the Ayer farm in our most despairing moments. So near and yet so far. The woman who had fed us had not lived in that cabin long, or she would have known how near to the Ayers' house that surrey was left.

Ristus accompanied us into the cabin,— a plank house of two rooms and four windows, — quite an aristocratic dwelling. Ristus was offered supper. He said “he reckoned he would n't set to thur table with us, but he'd take er bite by thur fire, ef they war er mine ter.”

They proved to be “er mine ter,” and the boy, still in his sun-bonnet, ate so many plates of chicken and sweet potatoes that we became alarmed. There was a dog each side of him and one in front. They all had bones galore. The firelight shone on the group, but again I

was so placed, or Ristus was so placed, that I could not see his face. I began to feel superstitious. If this boy had a face, it seemed to me that I could not be happy without seeing it. I was about to plead openly for that privilege, when he rose, set his empty plate down to the dogs, and, without speaking, walked out of the house.

A few moments later Amabel presented the bird-cage to her friend, and explained the rather self-evident fact that the bird was not in it.

“But it was a beautiful creature,” she said, enthusiastically, “and has been the cause of much amiability in us and others all through the journey. I may say it has been a means of discipline.”

The door opened. The head-covering of Ristus was thrust in, and the voice of Ristus asked : —

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“Whar be thur quins?”

“They are visiting at their aunt’s on Busbee,” replied Mrs. Ayer.

The door closed again.

Amabel said that she should continue to try to be reconciled to the belief that she should never look upon the face of Ristus, but it was too much to expect her to continue in ignorance of the nature of “quins.” Might she ask what were “quins?” A breed of dogs, perhaps? But, no — that could hardly be.

Mrs. Ayer laughed, but she looked troubled.

“Ristus meant twins,” she said. “It is his peculiarity to call them as you heard. He must know better; no one else speaks of them thus. He is a strange boy. Perhaps you can make something of Orestes. He has an ideally beautiful head.”

“Then you have seen his head?” inquired Amabel, quickly; “and his name is Orestes?”

Mrs. Ayer nodded, and left that subject, going on to say:—

“You did not know that we had taken poor white twin girls to ‘raise.’ Wait till you see them. Eleven years old. Unadulterated poor white stock. They will be over to-morrow or the next day. They are crazy to see the company we were expecting. They puzzle me.” The speaker sighed heavily. “If you need more than Ristus and the ‘quins’ to occupy your mind, then your mind is of vast extent. Why does Ristus, who is here a dozen times a week, and whom the dogs love more than they love us, always stop down there below the melon patch and scream at the top of his lungs to know if the

dogs bite. Some one always has to go out and shout back that they don't bite. But that is a trifling problem, I acknowledge. It is a wearing one, however, when you have to contend with it daily. One time I asked him why he did thus, and requested him to discontinue the habit. He replied that that 'war thur way ter do,' and he assured me that it was a way he 'reckoned he should keep urp.' Have you heard that we-uns plow too deep? Yes, I thought you would hear of that. Well," as if trying to shake off irritating memories, "there 's one thing we do have here in perfection, and that is scenery."

CHAPTER V

A Bill of Particulars

BUSTER was a yellow dog; Petite was a yellow dog; Little Bull was a yellow dog. Let me vary these announcements by adding that Tip was a brown dog. Counting these together, it will be found that there were four in all. Not counting, but making an estimate by means of the general effect they had upon you as they rushed about, you would have said there were a dozen. These were the dogs that came down with shrill greetings on the night of our arrival at Mr. Ayer's, on the North Carolina Mountain. These were they who escorted us every time we went

out to climb a hill or to descend into a valley. It is always climbing or descending here. It was very fortunate for us that we were fond of dogs, not only "in their places," but out of them. These animals were so small that we could always have one or more to hold whenever we sat down. They were smooth-haired terriers, entirely untrained to anything in particular, but extremely bright "of their own accord," as Amabel said. Indeed, they had such knowing faces, especially Tip, that we felt that we must be guarded in our speech before them.

When you have a small terrier sitting upright on your knees, vis-à-vis, watching alertly every movement of your lips, moving ears and eyes in response to each change of tone in your voice, being exhilarated with you, or depressed with

you, then you feel as if you should be very careful indeed. He may not go and tell what you have said in an effusive moment, he is too loyal to do that ; but he will know all the same, and he lets you know that he does know. As you look at him and meet his keenly intelligent gaze, you suddenly give him an ardent embrace. He responds by an instantaneous lick across your face, then immediately sits again in his old position and says you may go on with the conversation you have interrupted ; he wishes you to understand that he loves you, but that he cannot be hugging all the time ; he wants to know the end of that story you were telling your friend, and at the end of it perhaps, he hopes, you will have time and inclination to give him a piece of corn pone with bacon fat spread on it. That is Tip, the brown dog. He has

constituted himself our especial attendant, so especial that occasionally he will not allow Little Bull to go a stroll with us. He does not fight Bull, but he manages to make it so very unpleasant for that individual that he is glad to go back up the mountain, lie down in the sun on the stoop of the house, and pretend that he did not really want to go, after all. Bull is the most uninteresting of all the dogs. He is a mongrel. He has a way of running, sometimes, with his tail between his legs, and he looks as if he might be deceitful. We do not care much for Bull, and I fear he does not get his share of meat.

Buster is such a very yellow dog that he is almost of that hue called "old gold." He is the largest, and he is the watchdog pre-eminently. He lies in

front of the cabin, and when any one is seen on the remotest confines of the land he rushes forth, fearful in his bark. He makes up in barking what he lacks in inclination to bite. He leads forth his mates, and then there is a chorus. All people within hearing run to see what has come on to the land. It is the custom here for a stranger who is approaching a house to pause a long distance away and to shout out the question, as Ristus had done, "Dogs bite?" Some one generally appears, the dogs begin to wag and smile, and the stranger may approach. If a person took the pains to look into Buster's face, even when he was enjoying a paroxysm of true watchdog barking, it would be known immediately, if that person were at all wise in such matters, that nothing could induce this animal to bite anything. He has such

a mild forehead, such gentle eyes, and has altogether such a debonair, well-wishing manner, that his protecting airs seem rather of a farce. It seems to entertain him greatly, however, to appear to protect, and he does no harm by these pretensions. It is sad to be obliged to relate in this biography of Buster that he sometimes wanders off to neighboring mountains, and on those mountain pastures he catches and kills sheep which do not belong to him, and for which his master is obliged to pay. On such occasions there are invectives heard in the Ayer mansion, awful threats to kill Buster, and declarations that he is no manner of good to anybody. But when Buster appears, so affable, so glad to see you, so sure you are glad to see him, then there is no more threatening. He is smiled upon and given something good to eat.

Do not tell me that I am talking too much about dogs. I am not going to say nearly as much on the subject as I wish to say, and is n't that forbearance a reason why you should forgive the garrulity in which I do indulge? There is Petite, who must still be mentioned. It may not be too much to say that Petite is a lady, and is the idol of her mistress's heart. She is well-bred, somewhat exclusive, does not always join the canine circle, apparently thinks Tip has a spice of the canaille in him, and in consequence does not like him. She never notices Little Bull at all, or only with the greatest disdain, but she is so good as to associate often with Buster, and will join with him in barking intruders off the land. When she returns, panting, from this duty, she always has an air as if she would explain that this promiscuous barking was

not according to her taste, and that she participated in it only because Buster wished it, and Buster was her friend. It was Buster who, in a protective ramble, had found the forsaken surrey and had drawn his master's attention to it. The finding of this carriage in the woods on the mountain slope was something like coming upon a waterlogged ship at sea.

It was with great surprise that in the afternoon of the day after our arrival, hearing Buster's vociferations, we looked out and saw a horse and surrey slowly coming up the cartway to the house. It was certainly the identical carriage which we had reason to remember, for there was the wheel with no rim. On the front seat were two figures, which were soon decided to be the figures of Alick and Ristus; one could hardly mistake the bonnet and coat of the latter person.

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I was struck with the spirited way in which Alick climbed from the wagon. We were all on the stoop now. Alick took off his hat and carefully removed from the crown of it a folded piece of paper. He gave it to Amabel, with the explanation that it was "for them ladies." Then he said "his father said as how he must charge \$1.50 more 'n he reckoned, 'cos thur trip had been so long, an' 'cos thur'd ben a spoke lost, an' 'cos twa'n't good fur thur surrey er bein' out over night; an' 'cos he, Alick, had been kep' from work so long; an' 'cos 'twas worth it anyway."

We listened speechlessly. We had already paid Alick, very foolishly, when we started, the price he then asked, \$1.50, and had naturally believed we had discharged our indebtedness so far as he was concerned. I think it is the usual

way with women, that they pay an exorbitant charge and then scold about it afterward. We were about to do that, when Mr. Ayer, coming down from the barn and feeling thunder in the atmosphere, asked what was the matter. We explained. How great a thing it is to be a man on such an occasion as this!

“Don’t you pay it,” he said to us. Then he told the boy that if his father understood the matter he would not think of asking for more money. He ended by threatening that the women he brought up the mountain would ask damages for having had such an inefficient driver.

Alick turned away, muttering that “somebody’d got ter pay fur them spokes. If them women had n’t come’s they did, he’d er had time to er got er rim on.”

“If you say another word I’ll thrash you!” refreshingly said Mr. Ayer.

Yes, it is a great thing to be a man. How we would have liked to be able to tell Alick, in a bass voice, that we would thrash him! Nay, I will go further; how we would have liked to execute that threat!

We turned with gratitude to our preserver, and he suggested that we might better see what there was in that paper. Had anybody served any kind of a writ on us?

Amabel opened the paper. It was written in a handwriting so very ornate as to remind one of a writing-master’s work. It began:—

“To two ladies supposed to be staying at Mr. Ayer’s, in Limestone Township.”

When Amabel had read these opening words we all clustered eagerly about her.

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A BILL OF PARTICULARS FOR DAMAGES.

To two rolls of jean which were tumbled from the counter at store, and which fell into a pool of kerosene and were soaked so that they are nearly a dead loss.	\$7.10
To eight white plates at 10 cents	.80
To three kerosene lamps at 85 cents	2.55
To four bowls at 15 cents60
To miscellaneous damage in a gen- eral way, and to shutting off custom for one hour . . .	5.00
Total	<hr/> \$16.05

When Amabel had finished reading this we all looked at each other. Then Mr. Ayer said, "Thunder!" reached out his hand and took the paper. It was from Mr. Blank, the proprietor of the store where we had waited for Alick to come and take us to the mountain. Mr. Ayer read it aloud again. After

this second reading he turned and asked why we had been so very destructive while we waited at Mr. Blank's. Would it not have been enough for us to have broken a few plates and bowls? Could we not have been satisfied without soaking jean in coal oil? Really our progress was like that of an army. When he had spoken thus far, Mr. Ayer laughed so loud and so long that I could hardly forgive him. Still —

Amabel became tragic. She struck her hands together. She cried out, —

“It is the redbird!”

And then she was made to tell minutely the particulars of what had happened while we tried to catch the bird. At the end she owned that she would not go through that scene again for more than \$16.05. She went so far as to say that she did not know that any amount

of money could tempt her to suffer what she suffered while she was trying to "swarm" up the walls of that store. "And if Mr. Blank feels in the same way, I think five dollars for 'miscellaneous damages' a mere trifle."

When she had finished speaking thus, Mr. Ayer, whose face was very red, began again to roar with laughter. We had not known before that he was such a rude man. We wondered how Mrs. Ayer could have married him. Still —

When the gentleman could articulate he turned sharply upon Alick, who stood with open mouth and staring eyes.

"You go home," he said. "When I have time I'll go down to the Junction, but we sh'an't pay you any more money."

Alick mounted his carriage, and as he did so we heard him say something about "spokes."

Mr. Ayer again read what he called our "bill of particulars." It was very strange that he should wish to read that so many times.

"Blank's nephew, who goes to school in Asheville, must have composed and written this," remarked Mr. Ayer. "If you think you really owe Blank some compensation, I'll go down and offer him ten dollars." He looked at his wife. "By George, Mary, we can't be thankful enough that the bird did n't reach our house!"

Upon this Mr. Ayer went off into another fit of laughter. It really was astonishing what our friend could have seen in him to make her marry him.

"When you have laughed quite enough at our misfortunes, Mr. Ayer," said Amabel, with great frigidity — here Mr. Ayer became perfectly solemn — "perhaps you

will listen while I say that if you will settle with Mr. Blank, even to the full amount of his bill, we shall be so thankful to you."

"All right," was the cheerful response. "I'll get you off for ten dollars; see if I don't."

In the evening, while Mr. Ayer sat reading the papers he had procured from the Busbee post-office that day, he was continually indulging in silent bursts of laughter, which he tried to conceal by holding a newspaper before his face. We had never before met so hilarious a man. His wife looked at him with a preternatural solemnity. Amabel said it must be very exhilarating to have so cheerful a companion, and she supposed Mary never became tired of seeing him sit and shake like that.

When we said good-night to Mr. Ayer

he made this very irrelevant remark to us :

“I’ve had such fun that I am willing to pay the ten dollars out of my own pocket.”

“I’m sure,” returned Amabel, in her most distant manner, “that I don’t know to what ten dollars you refer.”

“Oh, Lord !” said Mr. Ayer, as well as he could speak for laughing.

CHAPTER VI

Poor Whites on the Mountains

IT was the third day after our arrival at the cabin on the mountains. We had been out all the morning and had traversed the valley which lies between our "own mountain" and Busbee. But we had been careful to keep in sight a certain tall pine with a tufted top that stood back of the Ayer house. We had enjoyed all the experience of being lost which we desired. Besides having the tree for a landmark we had with us three dogs ; we felt well protected, and tolerably sure that they would know how to reach home, if we should not. We had climbed and had slid,

rather than walked, down pitches; we had crossed three branches, or one branch three times, we were not certain which. The air was thrillingly sweet, while it was also stimulating. We had recalled all the descriptions of these North Carolina mountains, and had agreed as to the supreme folly of them all. They are as far beyond words as that benignly vivid sky is beyond a painter's power. One may feel, however, if one cannot portray.

Amabel, who is a great scoffer at all approach to sentiment, even when it be not sentimentality, had become so affected by her surroundings as to quote poetry. She had just said that there was

“A distant dearness in the hill,
A secret sweetness in the stream,”

when a horse came slowly walking down the slope opposite us, on the farther side

of the branch. Buster dashed forward and swam the stream, Tip followed him, but little Bull, who had been allowed by Tip to go on the excursion, remained on our side of the bank and barked convulsively. We stood still and looked, for the horse bore two riders, two little girls, the one in front sitting on a saddle so much in tatters that it was wonderful how it was fastened, the one behind astride with her arms round her companion. Both children were looking at us with so absorbed a gaze that the horse was left to take care of itself, which it did by walking into the middle of the stream and there pausing to drink. Buster and Tip splashed and barked in the water with great demonstrations of joy. The girls were of the same size, were dressed alike in dark calico frocks, red "tires," and white sun-bonnets. They looked remark-

ably tidy. Their faces, seen now, were precisely alike. Of course, they must be the twins ; they must be on their way to Mrs. Ayer's. Their whole existence for the present was merged in a stare at us. That stare opened not only their pale-blue eyes, but their mouths ; it prevented them from noticing the demonstrative dogs. At last the horse lifted its head and walked to the bank, which was here quite steep. While the steed scrambled up, its riders continued their unswerving gaze. We advanced, and the horse stopped that it might crop some green leaves.

“ I suppose you are the twins ? ” said Amabel.

“ Yes-um,” said they in unison.

“ I suppose you are going to Mrs. Ayer's ? ”

“ Yes-um,” said they.

“ You have been visiting on Busbee ? ”

“ Yes-um.”

“ Did you have a good time ? ”

“ Yes-um.”

Perhaps Amabel felt at this point that the conversation was not sufficiently varied, for she became silent. The horse continued to eat, the twins continued to look. I now said that Mrs. Ayer had been expecting them the day before, and they responded “ Yes-um.” I remarked that the dogs were glad to see them, and they, not glancing at the dogs, said “ Yes-um.”

The gravity of the children’s faces appeared to be very deep. They had that preternatural solemnity which is never seen save on a child’s countenance. Their manner and voice, even their very stare, were so intensely respectful as to be almost flattering. It did not seem to me that we had ever excited so much respect before, and naturally we felt

kindly disposed toward the children. They did not seem to have any idea of going on, and we at last requested them to ride forward, and we would follow. They obeyed us, and we heard them chattering to each other as we walked behind. Their little sun-bonnets were frequently turned in our direction, but nothing more was said until we reached the cabin. There Mrs. Ayer came out. The twins kissed her and began instantly a flow of talk, speaking with an indescribable intonation, with a curious flatness, and using strange terms sometimes. I immediately liked them. On my expressing this feeling to Amabel she demurred. She astounded me by declaring her belief that they were "underhanded" and "deceitful." I did not think so. Had the respectful homage of their manner affected my judgment?

When their bonnets were removed we saw that their faces were of no particular color, with round, vacant eyes, so faintly tinged with blue as to be almost white, pallid mouths, hair in its way also almost devoid of color, like well-cured hay. They were flat-faced, or seemed to be. When they laughed their mouths stretched, but the laugh never affected their eyes. They had stubs of hands, grimed deeply as if the grime had been a birth-mark never to be removed. The only difference in their appearance was that one had more widely-opened eyes, and she was Ella, the other was Ellen.

They were very voluble with Mrs. Ayer, but also very respectful. They expressed deep regret that they had not taken their "learnin'-book" to their aunt's, and so kept up their lessons, for now Dee would be ahead of them.

“And Dee,” said Ellen hurriedly, “he don’t know nawthin’ of hisself; but I reckon he ’s gurt er head of us in his learnin’-book now.”

Ella quickly repeated what her sister had said. They spoke as if in a hurry, and breathed rapidly. They seemed to fill the little cabin as with a dozen people. They hugged each one of the dogs; if one said anything the other invariably said it after her. The interior of the house immediately had an effect as if a great wind were blowing in it and hustling everything. They began to help about getting dinner. They mixed a pone and set it down in its kettle by the fire; they called it “making bread.” In doing this they scattered meal all over the house, and they rattled the hot coals on to the floor when they settled the kettle. Ella poked the coals, and then Ellen

poked them. Ellen, on being told, took a broom to sweep up the meal and she diffused it yet more widely over the room. They always dropped every utensil at least once before being able to use it; then the other would say, "Thur now! See what you've durn!"

They rattled, banged, pervaded, talked, laughed, were constantly at work; they grabbed at the dirtiest things with entire good humor. They listened when you tried to teach them to be gentle, and said, "Yes-um," as if your words would have effect; they seemed to try, but they did not succeed. It was one of their duties to see that there was plenty of wood for the fire. This first night they forgot this until they were cuddled on the broad lounge where they both slept. All at once they sprang up with the suddenness of a whirlwind, rushed out of doors in their

night-gowns and returned laden with wood, which they flung furiously down on the floor by the chimney.

“I done furgot ter tote that wood,” said Ella in explanation of this sudden movement, and Ellen immediately added that she “done furgot ter tote that wood.”

They each insisted upon having a dog to sleep with her. Ella had Tip and Ellen had Buster. When they were all on the lounge that article of furniture was entirely appropriated.

For twenty-four hours after their return Amabel and I told each other many times that this exuberance on the part of the twins was probably caused by some cause which would soon be removed, and then they would become more calm. We thought that either they would become calm or we should become insane.

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Mrs. Ayer confided to us her belief that if a person were intending to adopt poor white twins that person should secure a large mansion with thick walls. She said dejectedly that a two-roomed cabin was not large enough for poor white twins. "And it seems strange," she added, "that children who have lived in a hut of ten or twelve feet square should require so much space. It may, however, be owing to a natural expansion." The speaker looked at us wistfully. "Do you think," she asked, "that the expansion will continue indefinitely? I took them from purely benevolent motives; I thought I might bring them up to be respectable women, and I knew they would not be respectable unless some one was actively concerned for them. Now, I am afraid that, deep in my heart I had a sneaking belief that my benevolence

would be rewarded in some way ; that these children would show a trifle of gratitude, for, though our home cannot be called luxurious, it is palatial in comparison with any surroundings to which they are accustomed."

"And they are not grateful?" we asked.

"Not a bit. I have felt from them a hundred times that they have a longing for the squalor of their old life, or at least, for their old companions. They have never said a word nor looked a look to that effect, but I have felt it. Oh, I tell you, they are little mysteries. They seem cheerful ; if asked if they are contented they promptly say 'Yes-um' ; they will join me in deprecating the life that is lived by such people as their mother and sister. They know fearful things of life, things that make you shudder,

Sometimes, unknown by them, I get a glimpse into their minds, and I am sick. There is filth in their thoughts. Good Heavens! I have cried my eyes out trying to think how I could save them!"

Mrs. Ayer was getting excited. She rose from her chair and began walking up and down the room.

"I want to save them," she exclaimed. "They are all ready to be wicked now. What do you think we should be if we had in us the blood of generations of such depraved ancestors? The mother of these twins has never had a husband, but a succession of men have occupied her cabin with her. An elder sister is an abandoned woman in Asheville, and sometimes she makes a visit to the hut on the mountain here. These children know all about their

mother and their sister, and they are not shocked by the knowledge. Have you any idea what these mountain people are? I had n't until I came here to live. Of course I had read about them. Does Miss Murfree know? Are those people over on the Tennessee side different from the men and women here? She has a glamour, a mist from her much-described hills and valleys, that obscures clear sight. I see no such characters. I see vile, low, licentious, sly people, and they are singularly devoid of any capability to understand anything different from themselves. Of course that is natural. There is n't a person on these mountains that does not think we took the twins to have them hoe corn and potatoes for us. When I was explaining to our next neighbor, he leered and winked, and said he thought we had done a good

thing, for 'the gals could hoe now as well as a nigger.' I did not say any more. I was disgusted. Those children affect me in the strongest way. I have a pitying affection for them that wrings my heart. Sometimes I think they love me a little, but I am not sure. They seem to want to be helpful; they will work half a day like small slaves; but their way of working is a kind of way suitable to savages, and they are not quick to learn most things. They are quick to learn evil, though, -- not a bold wickedness that can be forgiven, but a cunning, permeating, low-down kind of evil, that makes me despair."

Mrs. Ayer paused a moment. From farther up the hill came the sound of shrieks of children and the excited barking of dogs.

"They are coming back from the spring," she said.

We went to the door, which opened to the north.

The twins were just coming down from the brow of the mountain. They carried a large bucket of water between them, the dogs were careering, and a little in the rear, standing full up against the blue sky, and looking immensely tall, was a figure in a gown, apparently, and a sun-bonnet. In another moment Ristus had descended so that the mountain was his background. He also bore a pail of water.

"I suppose I have been too sweeping in my remarks," said Mrs. Ayer. "My husband says women always are. But you stay here six months and then tell me what you think."

Twins and dogs came flying down the rough path, the water splashing from their pail. Presently one of them hit

her toe and fell, the other on top of her, the water over them both. More screams and scrambling, and dogs flying about, in the midst of which Ristus arrived at the scene of disaster. He put down his own pail and lifted the sprawling and dripping twins to their feet. Then they all came on, not disheartened in the least. They would have to go up one hill and down another to the hollow where the spring was in an old field, and get more water. But what of that? It would put off the washing of dishes still longer; and I do not suppose the twins, any more than children of a higher grade, like to wash dishes. As for me, I feel that I can forgive a child a good deal of shirking if it be done to delay or to get rid of this kind of work. I remember my own childhood.

The twins precipitated themselves

toward Mrs. Ayer. They always had the effect of hurling or precipitating themselves instead of walking.

They had been taught to call their friend "Aunt Mary," and they now began a babble of explanations and apologies concerning the accident we had just witnessed, mingled with offers to go to the spring and fill the pail again. They said their clothes would dry on the way.

Meanwhile Ristus had put his bucket on the ground and had seated himself on the chopping-block a few rods away. He was evidently warm, for he removed his sun-bonnet and held it in his hand.

Amabel and I lost no time in hurrying out to see Ristus uncovered.

Had not some one told us that he had an "ideal head"? But we were far from being prepared for what we

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saw, and it seemed impossible that this face and head could belong to a rough fellow who said "Naw" for "No," and who slouched and was a glutton.

CHAPTER VII

Ristus and Ole Pink's Baby.

RISTUS continued sitting on the chopping-block as we appeared. The whole company of dogs were clustered about him, but he was paying no attention to them. He was paying no attention to anything. His appearance was that of an entirely blank calm, his hand resting placidly by his side and his face being turned toward the grand outline of Mount Pisgah. Did he see it? Did he know he was living in the midst of unspeakable magnificence? If this youth had had a stolid, ugly face, like that belonging to Alick at the Junction, we should never

have thought of questioning if he cared for the beauty at which he was gazing. But because Ristus had a lovely face we unreasonably felt that he must appreciate loveliness. It was not logical to arrive at such a conclusion, but it was natural.

The boy, sitting there in his grotesque old coat, which was held together by white twine, was a picture to be remembered. Light hair rolled down in rich waves from the centre of the head to far below the throat ; his face was fair as that of a blonde woman is fair, thanks either to some natural power it had to resist the action of wind and sun, or to the protection of the sun-bonnet. Thick yellow-brown eyebrows made a straight line over long eyes that were of that yellowish dull color one sees sometimes at the bottom of still, clear pools when the sun shines on the water. Strange eyes,

whose only expression now was one of childish calm. For the rest, the boy had a straight nose, a weak-looking, very scarlet mouth, and delicate, retreating chin, with a pretty cleft down the middle of it. His face seemed to be clean, but his hands had the look of hands which have never been thoroughly washed.

After the first brief glance at us, he had kept his eyes fixed on Mount Pisgah, and appeared to have forgotten that we were present. As his aspect was not forbidding, we ventured to address him.

“Have you always lived here, Ristus?”

“Ever since I come,” was the reply. Ristus turned his head toward us with a neutral gaze in his eyes.

“And when did you come?”

“Dunno.”

“Then you don’t remember being anywhere else?”

“Naw’m.”

“Is that woman your mother?” referring to the woman who had fed us when we had been lost.

“I reckon she must be, fur she gives me my eatin’s. Yer don’t reckon, do yer, as a ’oman ’d give a feller his eatin’s, ’thout she war his mother? But I ain’t heard noan say ef she war my mother, or ef she wa’n’t.”

After this answer we kept silence for a few moments, and all looked at the mountains. The dogs noticed us very little. They were constantly jumping up to beseech Ristus to give them attention.

He was the first to speak again, very unexpectedly to us.

“Mabbe,” he said reflectively, “she

mought be my sister ; do yer reckon as she mought be that, now ? ”

“ Hardly,” we said.

He clasped his hands together and held them out before him as if he were entreating something or somebody.

“ I ’ve dreamt about er sister, I have,” he said. “ But she wa’n’t no ways like Ole Pink ; no ways. Thur sister as I dreamt ’bout wur kind er shinin’, an’ lurvely, an’ white, an’ — what do yer think ? — she bent down out er er white cloud an’ kissed me. I ’ve dreamt that-a-way er power er times, an’ when she kisses me, I allers wake urp. So, yer see, I’d ruther she would n’t kiss me, ’cas, yer see, then she melts erway, an’ I git awake. Over yan, now,” he pointed to a brilliant opening between two mountains, where a diaphanous white cloud was floating, “ yan be whar I

reckon she lives, in that thur cloud. Yer see it."

We nodded. He continued : —

"So I don't really reckon as Ole Pink kin be my sister, though mabbe she be my mother. Ole Pink, some ways, don't 'pear like one as would ever be er ridin' on a pooty cloud, now, do she?"

"No, no!" we exclaimed, perhaps too forcibly.

He seemed relieved that we were so emphatic. In his mind, it was evident, there was a strong desire that Ole Pink should not be his sister. He did not seem disposed to talk any more just then. We asked him if he were working for Mr. Penland to-day, and he said, "Naw'm." He picked up his sun-bonnet, but he held it in his hand. Buster now succeeded in getting on the chopping-block with Ristus, and in bal-

ancing himself in a sitting position there. Ristus put his arm about the dog, and Buster looked down at the other three canines with a great deal of good-natured triumph in his face, while Tip and Little Bull made ineffectual attempts to dislodge him and get his place.

“I lurv dogs,” said Ristus, as if addressing the nearest mountain. But he turned to us as he remarked : —

“They be nearer humans nor humans be theirselves, I reckon. Dogs sorter gits inter yer, somehow, inter yer feelin’s, as humans don’t. I’ve reckoned a power er times as I wa’n’t er human, myself. ’Tain’t no great ter be er human.”

Ristus carefully lifted Buster to the ground, put on his bonnet and walked down the path. He had not gone far before the twins burst out of the house. They were in clean, dry gowns. They

ran screaming toward the boy. They called to him to come back and go to the spring with them again. He obeyed, and we saw the three children and the four dogs go up the path.

“I don’t know anything about Ristus,” said Mrs. Ayer, “that is, no more than you know. His origin is shrouded in mystery, as they say in novels. He may turn out to be the son of a prince. There is something strange about him. He gets his meals mostly at Ole Pink’s. Oh, dear, no, of course, she is n’t his mother. I don’t know where he sleeps. Nobody knows. Twice, however, he has slept in our ‘roughness’ up there by the corn barn. That was in the summer. Has he not a poet’s head? If I could paint, I would put his vignette in the midst of some water-lilies. Odd, is n’t it, but I always paint him, mentally,

with water-lilies about his head. He is not like the others here; he isn't vile. What else he is, I leave you to discover. I have the twins to study, and I find them quite sufficient to occupy my mind."

Since the twins have arrived, there seems to be less room than ever in the cabin, and when they are in it we try to be out of it, as much as we can. The weather is a continued, glorified kind of an Indian summer. Why should one stay in the house and hear the hubbub of the twins, when, by strolling a quarter of a mile down the mountain, one comes to a nook whence one may gaze on the silently rolling French Broad, with giants clustering their tall, wooded heads everywhere? No, we have stopped between four walls very little of our time thus far. When we walked out this

morning the twins were scraping frying-pans, banging pots and kettles together, and crashing plates and cups and saucers against each other. In brief, they were washing dishes, chattering shrilly, and breathing in quick pants. Mrs. Ayer said that it would be but a little time longer that they would be obliged to wash dishes, for all her crockery would shortly be broken. Upon this, the twins cried out to know what she meant.

"I'm sure, Aunt Mary," cried Ella, and Ellen after her, in the same words, "we-uns ain't broke noan only jis what kinder slipped, yer know, and kinder smashed, yer know. An' Aunt Mary, most of hit war Buster's fault, or Tip's fault, er gettin' 'tween our legs, an' er urpsettin' us, Aunt Mary."

We left them explaining whose fault it was. We had not gone far before Ellen

and Ella called after us from the wood pile : —

“Aunt Mary wants ter know do yer want them fysts with yer? They wants ter go.”

“The fysts want to go,” said Amabel in an explanatory manner to me. “It is a dictionary word ; you ought to understand it ?”

I confessed that I did not know all dictionary words ; and then she confessed that she had only known since yesterday that fysts were little dogs. Yes, by all means, we would have the little dogs ; and they immediately shot forth from the opened door of the cabin, and we all went on. Having learned something about the tangle of misleading cart tracks through the woods, we took the direction of Ole Pink’s cabin. We were going to carry our offering to her in exchange for the

kindness she had shown us when Alick had forsaken us.

The cabin door was open, but we heard no sound from within. We stood at the entrance and looked, while the "fysts" ran in and began to nose about. There was a faint glow of coals on the hearth. The black-and-white dog rose up, growling, the hair standing straight along its back. In the dusk we discovered that there were two forms on the bed on the floor, a long shape, and a short one. Of course, they were Ole Pink and her baby. As we advanced into the room, the long shape rose and it was not Ole Pink, but Ristus in his army coat. He held up his hand at us and made a hushing sound between his teeth; then he led us outside the house. His hair was tumbled across his eyes, and he had an anxious look.

“Yer mought wake her, yer know,” he said, when we were all beside the ash-hopper, and he felt it safe to speak. “She ’s done gone ter sleep, yer know.”

“The baby, you mean?”

He nodded.

“But where ’s Old Pink?”

“Dunno.”

He brushed his hair from his forehead before he said :

“I ain’t seen Ole Pink sence er nour by sun this mawnin’. I come fur my breakfus’, an’ she war a gwine jis then. She reckoned she ’d go Shiloh way ; she reckoned she mought go ter preachin’ ’fore she come back. She reckoned ef I war er mine ter I mought tek care the babby, or ef I wa’n’t er mine ter, she said it mought git ’long ’s it could, fur she war sick of bein’ tied to hit. So she said.”

We did not know what to say, and so were silent. Ristus was tying some of the strings on his coat.

“I ain’t used ter a babby much,” he went on, “an’ she’s cried a mighty sight, an’ she won’t eat pone ’thout ’lasses, an’ I ain’t gurt no ’lasses; an’ she’s gurt sick er fat meat; an’ ’tain’t lookin’ as ef she’d have a good time. I ’m er prayin’ she’ll sleep er right smart while, I am, an’ when a feller carnt do nawthin’ else, I reckon prayin’ ’s what he’d ought ter be at. Prayin’ ’s better nor preachin’ I say. Ole Pink’s sot outer preachin’. She said she wished she had er pootier gownd ter wear, fur she mought be taken er shoutin’, an’ when folks is taken er shoutin’ at preachin’, she said as urther folks looked at-um, an’ then wor thur time for pooty clo’s. But I dunno.”

Ristus was speaking in a half whisper, and glancing every moment back at the cabin, fearing that the child would wake. The dogs were all out with us, and the only living thing in the hut was the wretched morsel of humanity which had been forsaken by its mother. Ristus said that if "he durst, he would run up ter Miss Ayer's an' beg some milk fur the child, but he should hate ter have it wake an' not find him."

Hearing this, we volunteered to bring milk and what else could be spared. When we returned, Ristus was walking in the sunlight before the cabin, carrying the baby in his arms, his whole aspect one of great anxiety, which feeling seemed relieved at sight of us.

There is a difference in the clay of which we are made, and this small creature was formed of the poorest kind.

She was yellow and pallid, and had already, about the wizened mouth, a dreadful look like her mother. We could not tell whether it were six months or a year old, it was such a stunted, shrivelled thing. It drank the milk as if it were nectar, and then its head sunk on the boy's shoulder and it was asleep almost immediately.

We said of course Ole Pink would return by night. The next morning while we were at the breakfast table, a shadow passed by the window and then Ristus entered. He wore his sunbonnet and he had the baby in his arms, and the baby was wailing.

"Where's that child's mother?" asked Mr. Ayer sternly.

"Dunno," was the meek answer. "Ter preachin', I reckon."

"To preaching," repeated the gentleman, and I thought from his face he was

going to utter an oath. But he only forcibly rose and brought out from a closet a large dish of mutton broth. "Some of you pour that into the baby, will you?" he said, and slammed out of the house. He opened the door to put in his head and say: "Give Ristus his breakfast."

It is three days since then, and Ole Pink has not returned. Some of the mountain people who have slouched into the Ayer cabin and lolled before the fire seemed to think it is a joke that Ristus should take care "er Ole Pink's young 'un." They said he need not do it "'thout he had er mine ter. Ristus wa'n't nawthin' ; no ways."

Ristus has arranged to do chores for Mr. Ayer, what time he can get, and in payment he and the baby are to have their "eatin's" here. He comes early in the morning. If the child will consent,

it is put down on a bundle of "roughness" while its guardian milks. It has not sufficient life to be very mischievous yet, though even now we can see that it has improved with the different food.

Sometimes it falls over on its back on the corn husks, and lies looking up at the sky. It never cries hard, only wails. It is never out of the boy's sight. When they were here last night the twins said that their sister said that "Ole Pink could n't be expected ter be tied urp ter that thur brat, an' ef she war Ole Pink, she would n't come back."

"She never will come back," said Mrs. Ayer. Then she looked at Ella and Ellen, and said earnestly, "But your sister was a wicked woman to speak like that."

"Yes-um," said Ella.

"Yes-um," said Ellen.

CHAPTER VIII

Thur Case Hoss

THE dogs were barking with deafening persistence. We all rushed to the stoop to see a woman on horseback just coming "on to the land" far down the mountain side. After great efforts, the animals were quieted long enough for us to hear in a sharp and yet flat voice, the question shouted up at us :

"Dogs bite?"

Mrs. Ayer signalled that the dogs did n't bite and that the woman was to come on. As she drew nearer, we saw that the stranger wore a white apron over her print gown. We had already observed

that to wear a white apron here is to be in the very height of a well-dressed condition. To have on such an article is to enjoy that mental state referred to by the Boston woman who averred that to be well dressed brought a consolation which religion failed to bestow. On the sallow faces of these female mountaineers there is a peculiar smirk, a certain expression of gratified vanity, when the white apron is worn, and if that portion of the wardrobe has a small flounce at the bottom, then the wearer is almost aggressively "set up" with her consciousness of fine apparel. I should not dare to call the person a "poor white" who owned a white apron with a flounce on it. We have almost decided in our own minds that a flounced apron, if it be white, is the visible token of the line drawn between poor whites and respectable farmers. On one side is

squalor, on the other side fortune and station.

"It 's Mrs. Case from over on the State Road," said Mrs. Ayer ; "let us hope she has not come to spend the day."

Mrs. Case drew near, her thin, saffron face very solemn in the depths of her white sunbonnet. She nodded and said : "Howdy. I hope you-uns is all well ?"

Yes, we were all well. Mrs. Ayer asked her if she "would n't 'light." She reckoned she would. And she slipped off the saddle, — a man's saddle. Ristus, who was in the background with the twins, came forward, bearing Ole Pink's baby over his left shoulder. He led the horse toward the barn. Mrs. Case shook hands with us all, slowly swinging our hands up and down, as if

she were going through with some kind of a religious ceremony at which it would be improper to smile. She again said that she "hoped you-uns is well," and we again said that we were well.

Then we all went into the cabin and sat down by the hearth. Mrs. Ayer tried to converse, making great efforts to elicit some response from her guest, who sat in the best chair, with her feet thrust out toward the fire which smouldered in front of her. She was so quiescent, not to say stagnant, that Mrs. Ayer at last desisted from her arduous exertion, and we sat in silence, Mrs. Case apparently enjoying her cud, or her wad of snuff, with melancholy satisfaction. After a quarter of an hour she turned her head toward Mrs. Ayer and asked: —

"Air yo' well enough?"

Mrs. Ayer seemed a trifle confused,

for she had already told this woman twice that she was well. Did Mrs. Case suspect that we were concealing some malady? Our friend asserted, with some emphasis, that she was in good health; and she added that Mr. Ayer was well; also the twins, as if she would forestall any inquiries concerning them.

Mrs. Case leaned forward.

"I seen thur twins ain't run away yet," she said.

"Run away?" repeated Mrs. Ayer.

"Yes-um. When they was ter thur mill last week they said as they was ter run away. They said as they did n't have 'nough ter eat."

Mrs. Ayer flushed with indignation. Mrs. Case smoothed her apron. Contrary to the expectation of the latter, Mrs. Ayer did not pursue the subject. She asked about Mr. Case's crops. But

the guest was not going to talk about crops. She said that her husband did n't plow so deep but what his "crops was torrable. He'd ben er breakin' a piece down by thur river. When he was thur, he seen thur twins er talkin' with their mother. 'T wa'n't no good fur um ter talk with thur mother." Mrs. Case had heard that the mother had "gurt a new ole man," leaving us to translate for ourselves this somewhat contradictory statement, and that they were living a "piece over toward Black Mounting." She reckoned Mrs. Ayer must be "'bout ready ter git ketched of um."

She received no reply to this remark, and the silence was so impressive that even Mrs. Case dropped the twins as a topic of conversation.

Presently she resumed by saying that she reckoned we-uns had heard about the

death of her son-in-law in Asheville last week. She said he wa'n't nawthin' nor nobody in his life, but "he died rejoicin'." She had an indescribable drawl upon the last word of every sentence, and this drawl was particularly noticeable now as she pronounced "rejoicin'"; there was a certain smack of satisfaction, too, in her tone, that told that she was glad her daughter's husband was dead, and also glad that he left this world rejoicin', though he had been no good to anybody while he had remained in this existence.

"We be er gwine ter take our gal home, an' the little gal," she said. "My husband said he reckoned he could get victuals 'nough. The widder, — that's my gal, — she took it lighter 'n I was 'fraid she mought" — nasal lengthening out of "mought," and pious ele-

vation of the eyes. "I thought I'd let her go er visitin' so she 'd git ketched of her sorrer sooner. She'll come back right peart, I tell my old man. We can't be thankful 'nough that Bill he died with Jesus in his soul. I tell 'um folks may have er high place in this world, but in the eyes of thur Lamb onter his throne er light we sh'll be jist 's good as thur richest. I tell 'um thur Redeemer of thur world loves us poor folks, jist 's well 's he does thur rich ones, ef we behave 's well."

We all made an assenting murmur. Mrs. Case seemed very well pleased with her last remarks ; so well pleased that she immediately repeated the latter half of them, and we again made the same murmur.

She began now to give minute particulars of her son-in-law's illness and last

hours, particulars which I will not repeat. At the end of this narrative she said she "didn't know nawthin' who war er gwine ter pay Bill's doctor." She asserted that money must be raised some way. Having said this she turned to Amabel and me, slowly, but with great unexpectedness, and told us that she had heard we wanted to buy a horse to ride, — one that had a saddle gait, and did n't trot.

We were so surprised at this turn in the conversation that we acknowledged that we did think some of buying a low-priced horse if we found one that suited. We spoke thus, though we saw vaguely that Mrs. Ayer was making some kind of a signal to us. We did not understand what she meant, and so felt keenly anxious, and quite sure that we had said the wrong thing.

“I reckon old Yaller-tail ’ll suit you-uns,” said Mrs. Case. “I reckon we mought go out an’ look at him.”

She evidently meant the horse she had ridden. She rose as she spoke. Her face could not look animated, but there did come a trifle of life into it as she spoke of selling the horse. She kept close to us as we went to the barn, — so close that Mrs. Ayer could not give us any advice, though she contorted her face into dreadful shapes in her anxiety to make us understand something, we could not guess what. We had no idea whether she wished us to know that we might better buy the horse, or not even look at him. This uncertainty was trying. Ristus was not visible. We heard the twins shrieking up beyond the inclosure where the “roughness” was stacked.

Mrs. Case went into the barn and led

out "Ole Yaller-tail," a beast which escaped being a clay bank in color, save for his tail.

"You-uns try him," she said.

I have the weakness of always being ready to try anything in the shape of a horse. We took off the saddle and replaced it with Mrs. Ayer's saddle. It was evident that the horse's knees were a good deal sprung, but it was a large, fat-looking animal with a mild eye. We said that its knees didn't seem to be right, and Mrs. Case responded that when "er hoss wa'n't young she reckoned they wor better hosses ef they gurt knock-kneed a bit."

She gave no reason for this theory of hers. She plainly had the knack of the true horse-dealer in affecting to believe that an animal she was trying to sell was in fact a little more valuable by reason of

some defect, — a defect which she would openly acknowledge. It is astonishing how a genuine trader will give you, for the time being, the feeling that if his horse is somewhat hurt by the heaves it is but a sign that it is a “mighty good hoss,” and you are lacking in judgment if you would prefer a steed without the heaves.

“Yaller-tail” stood perfectly still while we pulled at the straps. Then Amabel insisted that I should mount, saying that I knew about horses, and she did n’t. It was likely she was aware that she could not please me more than by saying I knew about horses. I did n’t really know, but I wished that I did, and I am afraid I have occasionally talked with an air about hocks and pasterns and flanks.

I rode Yaller-tail slowly down the steep path. I would not try any faster

pace until I was on the comparatively level ground of the path which wound in the valley. I had neglected to take any switch with me, but just as I left Mr. Ayer's land I met a negro whom I knew. At my request he cut me a whip from a sourwood which was growing near.

"Yo' ain't bought Miss Case's hoss hab yo'?" he asked anxiously. "Don't yo' go an' do dat; yo'll 'pent de longes' day yo' lib," he said with extreme emphasis.

When I asked what was the matter with the horse, he said he didn't know, "o'ny its knees wor wrong," and he added that it "'peared like Miss Case wor so pious dat 't wa' n't safe er tradin' wiv her."

This was the first time I had ever heard of piety standing in the way of an honest trade. Jake went his way and I

mine. I thought it would be foolish in me if I let the advice of an ignorant negro affect my judgment. I was n't looking for a fine animal or willing to pay for such an one. Mr. Ayer's horses were worked so constantly that Amabel and I could not hear from the post office as regularly as we wished. We had asked each other why we should not invest moderately in something which would be at our command at any time. Here seemed to be the opportunity.

I found the sourwood whip a very poor weapon. The more I struck with it the more Yaller-tail would not move from a walk. It might be that the horse had conscientious scruples about being urged by a piece of sourwood, and, the switch being entirely in shreds now, I thought it advisable to try another kind of arboreous weapon. I rode along under a low-

growing oak tree and pulled off the first branch which came to hand and with this branch I beat Yaller-tail ; he responded by breaking into the minutest kind of a rocking gait. It did not seem as if he covered ground as fast as when he walked, but he put on all the airs of going at a great rate, so that I was almost deceived myself. This kind of motion lasted possibly a minute and a half, and then Yaller-tail appeared to slump, and then to walk again.

I said to myself that one could not expect much for a little money, and that we ought to be satisfied with anything that would carry us. Time was nothing to us ; and it would probably be beneficial to remain for long periods in this delicious air ; and then the opportunities to gaze at the mountains, to hear the rushing of the "branches !" One might do an unlimited amount of landscape gazing

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while riding on Yaller-tail from Mr. Ayer's to Busbee post office ; there would be time enough, I knew, from my short acquaintance with this horse, and I also knew that there was scenery enough.

At this point in my meditations it occurred to me that I did not yet know what sum Mrs. Case would mention as her price. I turned the animal back toward Mrs. Ayer's and again beat it with my oak branch. I kept on beating, so that I might emerge into the view of my friends riding at the full speed of the rocking gait. I succeeded. I saw Amabel half way down the path. She waved her hand at me and I waved my branch. In doing this I necessarily did not, for the moment, strike the horse with it, and so he began to walk.

Amabel met me, and for a short time we were alone.

“Do you call him spirited?” she asked with great solicitude.

In response, I inquired what she thought. She replied that, though Yaller-tail himself did not seem spirited, he appeared to be the cause of spirit in me, for she had never seen me look more animated than as I came riding forward, wielding my oak branch. She said she supposed we could get to the post-office on him and back again, and that was about all we expected. Of course the journey, of three miles and return, would take all the daylight hours, but it was good for the health to be out-of-doors. Anabel concluded that if Mrs. Case did not ask more than five dollars we should not lose very much if we bought the horse.

“But I wish I knew what is the matter with Mary,” she said, referring to

Mrs. Ayer ; “she has been ‘making up faces’ behind Mrs. Case’s back, and gesturing and going on so generally that I am bewildered. Does she mean for us to buy the horse or not ?”

We agreed that the most cautious plan for us to follow would be to ask that the horse be left with us for a day or two, and then we would decide.

“We could n’t ride a fast horse up and down these mountains, you know,” I said.

Amabel assented. And then she asked if I thought there were oak trees enough, and sourwoods enough, — “for whips, you know. You have destroyed two in the half-hour you’ve been riding.”

To our amazement Mrs. Case said her price was sixty-five dollars, but that her old man had said she ought to get seventy-five for it.

“I never did like that kind of front legs in a horse,” said Amabel. I tried to call up sufficient effrontery to say that we had contemplated offering five dollars, but I could only say deferentially that we hoped she would be willing to leave Yaller-tail for a couple of days, when we would see her and tell our decision.

She demurred. Said “ Mr. Case wor so kinder sot onter this beast as he never’d part with hit ef ’t wa’n’t fur payin’ Bill’s doctor.”

She stood with her hands on her hips meditating. The twins came yelling down from farther up the mountain and joined the group, not saying anything, but staring at one face and then at another.

CHAPTER IX

Sequel to Thur Case Hoss.

FINALLY Mrs. Case announced that she reckoned she'd leave Yaller-tail until the next day, when one of us could come over to the State Road and see her. She said she could walk home, and she started directly, going down the steep path with that easy stride which I envy.

Now, unembarrassed by the presence of the owner, we examined the horse again.

“What a fat, nice-looking creature it is, all but its front knees!” said Amabel, longingly.

“Do not say front knees, because it has no hind knees,” I remonstrated.

Then I instructed my friend in equine anatomy.

When Mr. Ayer came in from a far-off part of the farm he would hardly look at the horse, only saying that it was enough for him to know that Mrs. Case wanted to sell it.

But his remark did not alarm me so much as something I heard Ella say to Ellen as they were picking up chips that afternoon near where I stood.

“I reckon,” says Ella, “as how that must be thur ole Case hoss as has fits.”

“I reckon,” returned Ellen, “as how it must be thur Case hoss as has fits.”

I did not speak of what I had overheard. I only made a firm resolve that, early in the morning, I would tell Ristus I would take care of the baby while he rode Yaller-tail home and told its owner

that we had decided the animal would not suit us at any price. But when the morning came, alas ! — but I must not anticipate.

My last coherent thought after I had gone to bed that night was one of gratitude that I had overheard the twins talking of their belief that “ it war thur hoss as has fits.”

It would be sufficiently dreadful in a level country to be mounted on an animal which was in a convulsion, for you would not know in the least what your fate would be. It would be still worse in this mountainous region to ride such a creature, for there would be no uncertainty at all about your fate ; if you were thrown off, you would go rolling down a steep mountain, and you would land in a branch or in a gully ; in either case your physical condition would be ruined.

No, the “Heart of the Alleghanies” is no place in which to learn to ride a “fitty hoss.” I would rather never ride at all. My dreams that night were dreadful, and I was glad when the morning came. I was awake before it was light. I watched the reddening east through the window and through various openings in the walls of the house. Since living in a cabin among these mountains I think I have discovered what it is that prolongs the life of people who seem, from poverty and ignorance, to violate every rule of health. It is fresh air. They have it all the time; they cannot shut it out if they would. When you see a small hut without windows and with the doors closed — this is in the night, for the door is rarely shut in the day-time, whatever the weather — you may be sure the hut is

full of men, women, and children. Your first thought is that they must be breathing the foulest of air, and how do they live? If you should walk into that cabin, stepping over the sleepers on the floor, you would find it well ventilated; there are big cracks everywhere, and there is an enormous open chimney. The air on these mountains is like something magical, even though it be cold, and these wretches have enough of it; it sustains them in spite of hunger and poison whiskey, and tobacco and sensuality.

I have said there are two rooms in this cabin. It has also two windows in each room, for it is a sumptuous dwelling. We have the room which is not the kitchen; the kitchen is where the big fireplace is, and it is where Mr. and Mrs. Ayer repose at night on a Northern bed-lounge, which is shut up in the day-time. The

twins' room is a corner of our room, where stands their old-fashioned broad sofa, which holds Ella and Ellen and Tip and Buster. There are drawbacks in sharing an apartment with Ella and Ellen and Tip and Buster. Some of these drawbacks are as follows : The little girls have an almost nightly habit of talking in their sleep ; they sometimes talk very loud and we get very much awake indeed trying to wake them. It often occurs that we are so long in effecting this that by the time we are sufficiently calm to become drowsy it is time for them to talk again. They have on several occasions been so conversational in this nocturnal manner that Mrs. Ayer has been obliged to come in and shake and pinch them. Amabel has suspected that the twins are not really asleep, but that they wish to converse without being

punished, and so adopt this method. But I have stated that Amabel thinks the twins are sly.

Then the dogs. Hardly a night passes that Tip and Buster do not have to protect us at least twice during the dark hours. We have never been anywhere in our lives where we were so much protected as since we came to North Carolina. The manner of protection in vogue in our sleeping room is something like this: A passing breeze stirs the peach-tree which droops over the roof, and makes a branch scratch along the shingles. Instantly Buster has thrown off the blankets and whacked himself on to the floor. He stands for a second listening; the branch creaks again, and he bursts forth into ferocious barking. At his first tone Tip is off the lounge and adding his bark. When each

dog has delivered one volley, each appears to become convinced that it is the peach-tree on the roof, and that there is no need of barking any more. Then they go back to bed again, whine somewhat if they find trouble in getting immediately under the covers, and are silent. After an hour or two, during which the twins may not talk, and we may sleep, there is some indescribable noise on the mountain side and both dogs are out again, protecting. If the outside noise continues, they continue. After a while it is morning and then the dogs indulge in deep and unbroken naps, unless we invite them out for a walk, when they are alert and ready. We have often wished that we could make these terriers understand that the peach-tree would not injure us in the least, even if they should not bark at it.

They have such an air of duty done after one of these barking fits that it is hard to remonstrate with them. Amabel thinks that she could bear a good deal more of dogs' barking than of twins' talking, but that she would not choose to have to hear either when she ought to be asleep. She argues that sleep is necessary even with air like the air here. It is possible that she is right. She says, furthermore, that good air can't do everything ; and again she may be right, but good air has to do about all there is done here.

We had enjoyed a remarkably good night with the Case horse in the barn ; the twins had not talked, and the dogs had not protected. I waked very early, and finding, when it was really light, that Amabel was also awake, we said we would go out and see how the horse

looked. Now that a new day had come, I thought that perhaps the horse did n't have fits, after all. It was by no means sure that it was so afflicted because the twins had been overheard to say they "reckoned it war."

We dressed and went out very quietly. Did you ever see a morning among these peaks, when the sun is just up and the mists are hiding all but the heads of the Titans? If you have looked upon such a scene you will be thankful all your life therefor. The Ayer cabin stands so high that we had a wide view, and we forgot the Case horse for many minutes. We were recalled to our purpose in thus rising by seeing the twins running from the house to the barn. They were always "sun urp," as they said; they raked out the coals on the hearth and made a fire.

In a moment Ella ran out of the barn and toward where we were standing.

“Law, me!” she was crying, breathlessly, “come an’ see thur horse!”

Ellen came behind her; she, too, was running, and panting out:—

“Law, me! Come an’ see thur hoss!” To add to the action of this matutinal picture, a voice far down the mountain now called out, “Dogs bite?” The mist hid the speaker completely, but we recognized the tones of Ristus. Though he came every day, he still went through that formula, which he seemed to think was demanded by some inexorable code of good manners. He had, however, ameliorated the process by not insisting upon an answer. Now Ella turned her face toward the place from which the shout had come and screamed back with the greatest contempt:—

“Master King! Yer know they don’t bite! Yer know yer could n’t make ’um bite!” Upon this, Ellen instantly dashed down a few rods and repeated the words, standing bent forward, with her hands on her hips, “like ’er ’oman,” she would have said.

After this the twins returned to us and we made our way to the barn where we had seen the Case horse put the night before. The little girls were in the highest state of cheerful excitement. Their hair blew about on their bare heads; their cheeks were red; if their eyes could have sparkled they would have done so now. But those pale, almost opaque eyes could not sparkle.

The Case horse had been put in the back part of the barn in an open space, the stalls being occupied by Mr. Ayer’s horses. The twins reached the place

first and then they stood pointing and crying : —

“Jis yer look er thur !”

We looked. Having once looked it was not easy to take our eyes from the object. The animal was down in such a way that its legs were in the air. How many legs has a horse ? Wait until you see one in this position before you answer that question.

Amabel grasped my arm and exclaimed in an awe-struck undertone : —

“ Do you see its legs ? ”

This was so foolish a question that I would not reply to it. She went on to say that she had always supposed that nothing but a centipede had so many. Then she suggested that perhaps this access of limbs on the Case horse was only temporary and occasioned by fits, for she supposed that the horse was in a

fit. Perhaps when the creature came out of the fit, or the fit came out of him, some of the legs would prove to be ephemeral, and would subside or evaporate. I did not listen to this talk, though I heard it. Ella and Ellen were edging up as near to the horse as they could, with open mouths and absorbed faces.

“Suppose you had been on his back!” said Amabel with a sigh of gratitude that her supposition was not true.

“Why suppose such a thing,” I said crossly, “when he is on his own back!”

“Yes, I know ; but — oh, heavens! what is he going to do?”

A strong movement vibrated through the animal, its legs shook, and then it was over on its side with its head stretched out. The twins shrieked with delight and jumped up and down.

“I think,” said Amabel anxiously,

“that we ought to call Mr. Ayer. There’s nothing like having a man present when a horse has a fit.”

It was hard to ask the children to leave this interesting scene ; I knew that they could not well endure to miss a single contortion. Secretly I did not think there would be any more contortions, for I believed the horse was dead. I said I would call Mr. Ayer. As I turned to go I saw that gentleman approaching with Ristus following, the baby on his shoulder. Also Black Jake, who worked for the Ayers, was coming out of the fog below us, but was still so much in it that he looked like a giant. Help was arriving from every point.

To our utter amazement Mr. Ayer was entirely calm when he came upon the scene, and again I was convinced that it is a great thing to be a man.

He leaned over and gazed. Then he said :

“ Cast, is n't he ? ”

Amabel cried out to know if that was what it was to be cast ?

Seeing the interested group, Mrs. Ayer now came from the house with a shawl over her head, and followed by the four “ fysts,” who were nosing about with the utmost vigor, hoping they would find something at which to bark. We hastened to give Mr. Ayer a minute description of all we had witnessed since we had come upon the ground. And still he said he guessed the beast was cast.

Black Jake had been bending his long body forward that he might have a better view. He now said he had heard that the Case hoss had fits, and he had also heard that when it got down it frequently required a “ teakle ” to get it up. Jake

talks in a dialect, and with a thickness and huskiness extraordinary even in a negro. We understand very little he says. Mrs. Ayer now translated his remarks to us.

“Very likely he has fits,” said Mr. Ayer, impatiently, “but he has n’t got a fit now. Jake, we must rig something so that we can get him up.” He turned to me. “By George!” he cried, “it’s lucky you were not on his back!”

Mrs. Ayer repeated the words with great fervor, and I began to feel like a person who had just escaped a great peril, particularly as the twins came nearer to me and gazed with an unblinking gaze, almost as if I were a monster.

Amabel and I tried to express our regret at having caused so much trouble. Mr. Ayer magnanimously said that nothing was any trouble if we could only be saved from buying that horse.

After this we stayed round while ropes were rigged and different "purchasers" contrived to raise the Case horse. It took a good while. It seemed as if it never would be done. It was astonishing how much power of resistance was shown by a being who appeared so powerless. One would have said that the horse stuck its nails into the ground and clung there. It must be raised to its feet or it could never be sent home. The sun came out and made magnificent pictures all about us; the mountains changed forms in the shining vapor, and still the horse was not up.

Finally Amabel said to me that she believed that Mr. Ayer would say some forcible words if we were not present, and she thought it our duty to retire, which we did.

Breakfast time came and passed, but no one had leisure to eat.

“It may be,” said Mrs. Ayer, coming back to the cabin from a visit to the barn, “that the Case horse will never rise again; and then you will be compelled to buy it because you cannot return it. It will be better to have it for a pet and visit it as it lies there, than for you to ride it. This is probably providential.”

She had no more than spoken thus when we heard a great shout at the barn. We rushed forth and saw Mr. Ayer waving his hat in our direction. We ran toward him. He was crimson and perspiring from his efforts, but he looked happy. And we all had reason to be happy. There was the horse standing. It had a calm expression, as if it were defying any one to prove it had been down; and it was picking up stray locks of hay.

“Do you think Ristus could lead it home?” I asked, eagerly. “I will take Ole Pink’s baby until he comes back.”

Ristus stepped forward and handed the baby to me.

“I aint er ’fraid ter ride hit,” he said, placidly.

He was soon out of sight among the trees, riding, and we were left with the baby, which now seemed to discover that its best friend was gone. It began to wail, and did not cease, in spite of all that we could do until the boy returned. He informed us that “Miss Case she wor that mad that she cussed an’ cussed. She said as you-uns should n’t git ketched er that hoss yit.”

This information made us nearly as mad as Mrs. Case had been; and we were not soothed when Ristus went on to say that the woman had sworn that “she

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wor er fule to er believe what a cussed lot
er Yanks had said.”

It seemed then that we were supposed
to have bargained for the horse, and that
now we refused to keep to our word.

Mrs. Ayer laughed, but there was a
bitter sound to the laugh.

CHAPTER X

*Ristus in "Trousies," and Jake
Seeks Advice*

"**I** SAY, now, huccum dat Ristus
in trousies?"

Black Jake, Long Black Jake, as he was usually called, put this question in great excitement one morning not many days after that day when we did not buy the Case horse. He was at the woodpile cutting wood. The inhabitants of the Ayer cabin were strolling about near. The twins were scraping kettles on a bench at the back door, and of course were screaming, for their talk could hardly be called anything else. The dogs had protected so much during the

previous night that they were indulging in a prolonged morning nap.

When Black Jake uttered the above interrogation Ella and Ellen dropped their kettles and rushed into the foreground, still holding the scraping knives in their hands and flourishing the weapons, entirely regardless of the fact that people had eyes, not to speak of other features. When they were pulled back they submitted in the most respectful manner, and assured us that they would not put our eyes out "not fur nawthin'," and that it was the fault of the kettles that they had knives in their hands at all.

We all went forward a good way that we might the better see the figure advancing up the mountain. Of course it was Ristus, for he bore a baby in his arms, and we could see his long light hair.

Yes, he was certainly, as Jake had said,

“in trouses.” He also had on a blue flannel shirt, and a broad felt hat turned up in front in the most approved mountain fashion.

“Law me ! Jis’ luke at him !” cried Ella.

“Law me ! Jis’ luke at him !” cried Ellen, and they both began to laugh and flourish their knives again. For the second time they were pulled back, and for the second time subsided in perfect respect. My friend asserts that respect is the twins’ trump card. She says that it is impossible to punish children properly for wrong-doing when they are so saturated with deep, not to say admiring, respect for you. The knowledge of this respect paralyzes the arm of reproof. Amabel used to spend hours watching these children and forming theories about them. I believed that she was always too hard

on them. My theory was that the poor little wretches could not be so deep. "Deep!" Amabel would cry, "wells are shallow to them. I should n't wonder if they had a train of action arranged with an eye to consequences a year hence. See how queer and reserved they are to any of their old companions who happen to come to the Ayers'. They have made Mrs. Ayer almost believe that they don't care any more for those low-lived creatures, — that they have risen in their tastes. I've inclined to believe it also, for Ella and Ellen have hardly a crevice in their armor. They frighten me with their skill. The other day those two Colwell girls were here, those lying, dirty creatures whom Mrs. Ayer distrusts so, and with whom she will not let the twins associate. When they had gone Mrs. Ayer said impressively that she should be

very unhappy if Ella and Ellen should ever be like the Colwells ; that she would sacrifice a great deal rather than have that happen. Those little girls listened with such devout respect ; it was too much ; no children could possibly be as deferential as they looked. I watched them more closely than I had ever done. When Mrs. Ayer was talking, Ella glanced at Ellen and almost winked ; she did n't quite wink, because just then she saw me looking at her."

It did not seem to me that it was very much against a child that she had almost winked. To this remark of mine Amabel responded that she believed we should both live long enough to know she was right. She further said that, without the slightest tangible foundation for her suspicion, she yet believed that the twins had secret meetings with "those nasty Colwells."

But while I am writing this Ristus is coming up the hill toward us. Before he has mounted very far our company has been increased by everybody on the Ayer farm. We all gaze with intense interest at the boy who is not wearing a long coat and a sunbonnet. Everybody manifests the keenest surprise, save, perhaps, Amabel. It strikes me as I glance at her that she is trying to look surprised with the rest. Now I recall certain mysterious and solitary visits to clothing stores when we were in Asheville the other day, visits concerning which Amabel was exasperatingly non-committal at the time.

Ristus was startlingly picturesque. I did not know before that a broad felt hat was such a thing of beauty, or that a coarse blue flannel shirt and heavy trousers could be so ornamental.

As the boy came nearer to us we saw

that he was blushing deeply. He kept shifting the baby from one shoulder to the other. He evidently could not quite believe there were no skirts dangling about his ankles. As soon as he reached us he put the baby down on a pile of oat straw and took off his hat shyly. Black Jake was laughing with deep guttural sounds. The twins were showing an interest I had never noticed in them before, and which irritated me. It somehow made their faces look coarse and repulsive.

Mr. Ayer stepped forward and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I congratulate you, Ristus," he said heartily. "I'm ashamed of myself that I did n't see that you had some clothes long ago. It is demoralizing to go about dressed as you've been."

Mrs. Ayer took Ristus' hand. "You've no idea what a change for the better this

is," she said. "But where did you get these things?"

I was conscious that Amabel was moving into the background.

"I'd like mighty well ter tell yer, Mis' Ayer," he replied, "but I war given to understand as 'twar er kind of er secret like."

As he spoke he looked full and beseechingly at Amabel, thus revealing the "secret" immediately. He seemed greatly surprised, however, when we turned to my friend and asked why she did not give us a chance to contribute our mite toward Ristus' new suit. She tried to explain that as she had decided to put a certain amount of money into the Case hoss, and then did not do it, why, she had made just that sum and must spend it some way. It occurred to her that a simple outfit for Ristus would still leave

her with a few dollars in hand, besides giving her a great deal of pleasure. "And Ristus is n't sorry either, is he, Ristus?" she said lightly, turning to the boy, who, with his hat still in his hand, advanced a few steps toward her, then paused, looking at her. His sensitive red mouth was quivering, and I was afraid he was going to cry. His peculiarly soft, light-brown eyes did not shed any tears, though they seemed to be full. His face and bearing showed a gratitude that was absolutely passionate. After a minute he spoke, with an entire absence of self-consciousness, no longer blushing.

"I don't reckon as nawthin' could be known as how I jis' hated ter wear them ole things er mine. But, yer see, I'd gurt to wear sumpin', an' them's all I'd gurt. I couldn't noways git ter earn

'nough ter buy nawthin'. Yer see, Ole Pink hed ter hev all I c'd get workin' fur Mr. Penland; yer see, she hed ter hev it fur my eatin's. I uster think as how I'd go 'thout eatin's, so 's I c'd hev trouses, an' I tried hit once't. But somehow I reckon as we be made fur ter have pone, or sumpin'. Anyways, I be made thataway. So I hed ter go back ter Ole Pink. I'd jis' 'bout give hit all up, 'bout trouses, ye know. When I've been ter preachin' I useter hear 'em tell as how we must be reconciled ter what happens ter us. Yer see I reckoned as how that meant me, — hit meant as I war ter be reconciled ter not hevin' trouses in this life. I've ben tryin' ter be reconciled ever sence. An' I've ben er tryin' ter be content, er thinkin' mebbe I sh'd hev trouses in Heaven. But I did think all thur time as how I'd resk havin' um in

Heaven, ef I c'd only hev um here fust.
But now — owin' ter her — ”

He paused, lifted his hand slightly toward Amabel, and then glanced down at his pantaloons-covered legs. He swallowed hard two or three times. Then he turned to Mr. Ayer and said that “folks as had always had trouses did n't know nawthin' what he 'd ben through er not hevin' um.”

He remained standing silent, gazing at Amabel a moment, then he went to where the baby was lying on the straw waiting to be taken. He lifted her in his arms and remarked that he war 'fraid he war late with his chores. He walked away toward the barns. Black Jake followed him. The twins glanced at each other and laughed; then, seeing that no one else was laughing, they became very sober. It was Mr. Ayer who spoke.

“If we did n’t already have twins, and if I was n’t a poor man,” he said, “I would pay some of these mountain women to take care of Ole Pink’s baby and then I would hire Ristus regularly to work for me. I don’t know what will become of the lad, saddled as he is with that child. I must think about this. I wish I could take the baby and drop it at the door of some foundling hospital. It would be a great pleasure to me to see Ole Pink horse-whipped.”

Mrs. Ayer held up her hand. “You must not talk so before the children,” she said reprovingly. Her husband replied that he must talk before the children if he talked at all. Then we womenkind returned to the cabin, where it was discovered that the dogs had risen and that they required their breakfast.

It was interesting to see the twins feed the dogs. They were always a long while in the performance of this duty, and chattered and laughed a good deal, sometimes tripping up over a dog and falling sprawling on the floor, pushing against each other in the small room and going on in a way to make a nervous person fly to the mountains for relief. Four plates of food were at last prepared. When these were ready there was always a discussion as to the nearest approach which could be made to an instantaneous and simultaneous presentation of these plates to the animals who were to eat. The argument was, that if one dog had his dish a second earlier than the others, the others would be grieved; in the words of the twins, "their little feelin's would be hurt." I was pleased with this manifestation of kindness, though the

carrying out of the kindness was sometimes very wearing.

“Ella, I say now, ain’t yer ready? Them fysts ’bout starved.”

“Ellen, yer shet urp. This pone sticks so.”

This kind of talk and continual tramping in the kitchen appeared to be kept up for hours. At last the decisive moment came. Each twin took a plate in each hand and in unison dived toward the floor and the selected dogs, whose little feelings were never hurt in the way of one being served first. It was at this process that we assisted as spectators on our return to the house. When it was over and the twins had gone to the spring there was a short season of peace. This season was interrupted by the appearance of Black Jake at the open door. This negro lived alone in a new log cabin

which Mr. Ayer had built for him a few rods to the north of us. He had his fuel and his uncooked food provided for him, and he did his own housework, what there was of it. For each day he worked for Mr. Ayer he was paid sixty-five cents in money. He had assured the Ayers when he came that "he warn no triflin' nigger, but one of de stiddy kind." He said there was nothing in the world so stiddy as he war.

He stood now balancing his long form in the doorway, shutting out the sunlight, his hat in his hand, grinning with embarrassment.

"Do you want anything?" asked Mrs. Ayer.

"I meck bole ter see yo' ef you am in lib'ty," he said.

"I suppose I am at liberty," replied Mrs. Ayer. "Come in."

Black Jake came in and stood uneasily by the fireplace. He would not sit down, but remained there all through the interview, alternately bending and straightening himself. As he was extremely tall, this bending and straightening was quite a process, and threatened to occupy our minds to the exclusion of his discourse.

“Wunst,” he began, “I laid out ter spick tu Mr. Ayer on dis subjick, den I tell myse’f yo’ is er lady an’ thuffore de properes’ pusson to consult. Hit am er del’kit subjeck.”

Here he bent and then pulled himself up, and we began to be interested.

“What is the subject?” inquired Mrs. Ayer.

“Marriage,” said Jake.

We became still more interested.

“I knows,” he continued, “dat

'twarn no way ter enter cawnjujial bon's 'thout spickin ter yo'. Datter way warn no way. Cawnjujial bon's be too solum."

This use of the word he thought was "conjugal" seemed to afford him deep enjoyment. He paused and I thought he was trying to think of a way in which he could employ the term again. He sank and rose, and then gave up the attempt. Immediately, however, his face brightened and he turned to where Amabel and I sat on the bed lounge.

"You-uns, ladies," he said, "has entered cawnjujial bon's, an' kin advise er pore colored man?"

We shook our heads. We saw pity come into his black countenance.

"You have been married three times yourself, have n't you, Jake?" said Mrs. Ayer.

He slowly assented, and Mrs. Ayer went on to say that she should think he could advise himself.

“Dar ’s whar yo’ be mistaken, Mis’ Ayer,” he said with emphasis, “women are so different; colored women I am referencin’ ter. I feared on um, yit I lub um. I’m at dis moment ingaged ter one in Asheville. I gotter hab advice fum some so’ce. Yo’ mus’ ’spect datter man need advice.”

Mrs. Ayer leaned back in her chair with an air of patience. She knew Black Jake better than we knew him, and perhaps she could guess to what he was coming.

“If you are engaged, how can I interfere now?” she asked.

“I’m not ’spectin’ yo’ tu int’fere,” here his long legs bent. “But sump’n gotter be done. She’s ready ter be married right now.”

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“ And you are not ready ? ”

“ Yessum. Dat is, I would n’t be gwine to say I warn ready.”

Mrs. Ayer waited for this remark to be explained to her.

“ Pus’n’lly, I be ready,” he said after a silence.

Again Mrs. Ayer waited, and while she waited the twins came back from the spring. Jake immediately went out of the house. He returned to say with great deliberation : —

“ I meck a p’int ob seein’ yo’ ’gin on dis matter, Mis’ Ayer.”

That evening Jake went to Asheville and the next morning a change was noticed in his appearance ; all signs of hilarity had left him.

CHAPTER XI

A Missing Bridegroom.

FOR two or three days after Black Jake's interrupted interview with Mrs. Ayer we all lived in a state of expectation. We felt as if something were going to happen. When a man is engaged, and his betrothed professes herself anxious to be married, and the man declares himself "pussonally ready," people naturally expect a wedding. Mrs. Ayer said she had quite intruded her presence upon Jake on several occasions, hoping he would resume the subject, but he did not. He went round about the farm with the most dejected air, looking longer and more gaunt than ever. It was depress-

ing to see him. Mr. Ayer said he worked less than before, if it were possible to work less. He had not confided in him at all, but when the gentleman had asked him what was the matter he had groaned and said he was "crossed in lub." Nothing more was said. We all thought that if Jake continued to be thus crossed the mere sight of him would have almost as bad an effect upon us as though we also were crossed in love. The twins watched Jake with a furtive, but intense interest. He had suddenly assumed an attraction for them.

"Jake don't laugh no more," said Ella, at the dish-washing.

"No," said Ellen, solemnly, "folks as is crossed in love carn't laugh, yer know."

It was not to be wondered at that a gloom seemed to be settling over the Ayer domain.

This state of things continued for about a week, and we were becoming so hardened as to be able again to enjoy the continued lovely weather and to think occasionally of something beside the pall which Jake had cast over us. It is doubtless dreadful to be crossed in love, but life must still go on.

We were discussing this very subject in a calmly cheerful way, the twins being on an expedition for chips, when a stranger appeared in the doorway. At my first glance I was struck with her figure and port. She was large, she held her head well back; her features were modelled with the same large freedom. An eagle nose between well-opened, handsome eyes, a mouth in keeping, she seemed a kind of rude, uncultured Zenobia. Here was an opulence of physical power and development

that is rarely met. I had never seen any such woman before. She was colored, but her features were not like those belonging to the negro race.

“I reckon dis Mr. Ayer’s place, ain’t it?” she asked.

When her question had been answered, she said she reckoned she mought ’s well say ter wunst as she war er lurkin’ roun’ fur dat no ’count nigger, Long Black Jake.

I immediately felt, as I had not done before, that Jake must be a man of some consequence to have such a woman as this “lurkin’ roun’” for him.

Mrs. Ayer acknowledged that Jake lived here, and she added that he had been very low in his mind of late.

The stranger smiled in a gratified way at this remark. Mrs. Ayer asked her to come in and sit down. She walked

across the little room in a way that made the cabin seem spacious that it might accommodate this empress-like being.

“Yes ’m,” said she, “I ain’t no ways s’prised ter year as Jake ’s low. He orter be low. I jes’ bundle him outer my house neck ’n’ crap when he thar lars’ time. I flung him out wid dis fist,” — she held up a large, handsome hand. Then she laughed, and her laugh had a ring in it very unlike the husky, unctuous laugh which usually belongs to the African. Still she seemed somewhat anxious. She went on : —

“Natch’ly he thought, I reckon, dat our ingagement war broke. I don’t hev no doubt as er gen’l’mun think ef he are hustled out widout no ceremony, neck ’n’ crap, as de ingagement be broke. Dat ’s natch’l, ain’t it, ma’am ?”

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Mrs. Ayer replied that she thought it perfectly natural for any gentleman, under such circumstances, to conclude that the engagement was broken.

“And a few bones, too, perhaps,” said Amabel.

The visitor stared at her a moment, then laughed again. It is very rare to find the common negro understand humor in the least, unless it be of the broadest burlesque kind.

“Dere war a promise 'twixt us,” said the woman, “but de time I flung him I had 'nother gen'l'mun in view. Now de other gen'l'mun done married yisterd'y, an' I'se come roun' ter 'gin my p'omise ter Jake. I feared I mought git er fall 'tween two stools if I warn spry 'bout huntin' urp Jake, yo' see, ma'am.”

Certainly she had made her position perfectly clear. We wondered how Jake

would like it. She went on to say that she should simply state to Jake that she made a mistake "flingin' him out dat time," and she was now ready for "mejitt wedlock." She looked out of the window at the log cabin.

"Dat's war we gwine to live, I reckon? I c'n work fur yo', Miss Ayer, an' Jake c'n work fur Mr. Ayer. I ain't had no ole man fur er long time. Gwine on two year sence my lars' ole man got tuk urp for stealin' an' war jugged."

"Then you have a husband living?" cried Mrs. Ayer.

"No ma'am. Dey say he died in prison. I ain't seen him die, but de news was brought ter me mighty straight, an' I ain't gwine ter 'spute sich news as dat. 'Twould n't be safe fur Bill ter turn urp 'live ergin now. I reckon Bill know dat; he'll stay daid, Bill will.

He warn bright, but he bright 'nough ter stay daid."

We were absorbed in looking at this woman, who sat erect and majestic in her chair as if she were on a throne.

"I call myse'f er widder," she said, "an' I should meck er p'int ob havin' er minister marry us. P'raps yo' got dat kindness in yo' heart dat yo'll let us hab de wedding hyar in dis house. Yo' see, I done give urp my room in Asheville dis mawnin' an' had my things moved to er cousin's. I war some back in my rent, an' some folks ain't no consideration fur er lady as is back in her rent. Dar am Jake now."

She was looking through the doorway as she spoke. She rose. Jake's long, drawn-out countenance changed to a look of wonder and then delight.

"Gawdermighty!" he cried out.

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“Is dat yo’, Sally? Hab yo’ come ter meck urp wiv me, Sally?”

Sally was quite dignified. She allowed him to shake hands with her. He hastened to say he “hoped she ’d ’scuse him fur ’bligin’ her ter trow him ou’ de do’ dad las’ time he visited her in Asheville.”

They walked toward the log cabin together. Sally retraced her steps to mention that she hoped there would be no objection to having the wedding there, and that she should insist upon having a real minister. It was not more than half an hour before Sally returned to us and Jake went to the wood pile and pretended to cut wood, but his axe flew very much at random and his eyes were on the house. He could see Sally through the window. This yellow woman had none of the negro slowness about her. She

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was shrewd, too, in taking her position for granted.

“Now, Miss Ayer,” she said, standing with one hand on her hip and the other hanging down, her whole aspect one of strength and readiness, “I kin rerlieve yo’ of all de hard work. I ’m stronger ’n mos’ any man. I kin do ou’ do’ work or housework. I meck no bones er sayin’ I kin do er smarter show in er day dan dat Jake. He’s kinder triflin’, he is. But I’ll tend ter him. I ain’t had no old man ter train in some time. I’ll train him. Yo’ll see he toe de mark. I kin do all de washin’ an’ cookin’. Jes’ like’s not yo’ll let me hab er few mo’ things in de cabin, — on’y er few mo’, meck us mighty comf’ble.”

I think Mrs. Ayer must have felt as I did, that to have Sally to the fore in regard to work would be to have a host.

I never saw any man or woman who gave such a sense of effectiveness. The very curve of that un-negro-like nose was a sort of guarantee.

Mrs. Ayer said she would take Sally.

“Yes ’m,” responded Sally promptly. “I’ll see yo’ ain’t sorry for dem words. An’ now, what time shell we sot fur de weddin’? Dis eb’nin’ ’bout eight? Dad’ll give Jake time ter gwi’ ter Asheville, git er few tings an’ bring out der minister. He sh’ll meck er soon start. Shell we say eight, Miss Ayer?”

That lady laughed and assented. Sally’s face was very pleasant to see as she said:—

“I’ll be grateful ter yo’ de longes’ day I lib, mighty grateful. Jake sh’ll be sent off ’n no time.”

It was true. Jake was seen going down the mountain toward the State

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Road for Asheville in less than five minutes. He was walking. It is not much for these people to walk six miles, or ten, or twenty. Sally had just walked out from the town.

Having set things "er gwine," as she said, she took off her white apron and her sunbonnet. The removal of the latter showed her thick, waving hair with its threads of gray. She twisted a handkerchief round her head, pinned up her skirts and began setting to rights the log cabin where she was to live. She told Mrs. Ayer she would prepare the dinner in her own cabin and bring it down to us. She averred she was a "sure enough cook"; and the dinner, of chicken and pone and tomato-okra soup and baked sweet potatoes, was served in such a way as to prove her words true. Nothing seemed to fatigue her. She worked like

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a lion,—only I believe lions do not work. She strode around, and “made things kinder whiz,” the twins said.

Just before sundown she came to Mrs. Ayer and said she believed all was ready. She had brought a bundle with her from Asheville. She had a pink cambric, the one “she’d ben married in de las’ time. She had kep’ it so ’s she reckoned it would do ter be married in ergin; ef she could on’y hev er flower-pot ter hold in her hand. She believed it was er good sign fur de bride to hev er flower-pot. She had n’t had none when she married Bill.

It turned out that by a flower-pot she meant a bouquet.

Having said this, she walked out with her grand step and left us to pluck the few chrysanthemums there were left blooming in the little wooden box at one of the windows. The sight of these had probably sug-

gested her bouquet to her. I have never yet seen any member of the colored race who was backward about begging for what was wanted. The twins were sent out to glean evergreens from the mountain side; Ristus and the baby came, and Ristus helped festoon this greenery until it seemed that we were anticipating Christmas. We were quite bowery. When Sally came in at dusk her yellow face glowed with joy as she looked about. She flung up her hands and gazed again, her magnificent figure full in the glare from the hearth.

“Master King!” she exclaimed. “I never was so outdone!”

She said “Master King” at intervals in the next few minutes and often smiled to herself. As the dusk deepened and the mountains encircling us grew blacker she became anxious about Jake. She said he

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wor sich er onusu'l triffin' nigger he might hev got de minister an' den los' him, some way. She wished she had gone herse'f, on'y Jake never 'd cleaned urp de cabin.

She retired to her prospective dwelling soon after seven o'clock, and when she reappeared she was in the pink cambric. If anything could have made her look like a common yellow woman this would have done so. But her noble physique dominated even over the tawdry finery. As Amabel remarked, Jake's betrothed could not be other than a kind of Semiramis or Boadicea, or "that sort of a person, you know."

As the clock ticked on and no Jake appeared, we became quite nervous with anxiety as we waited with the bride in the green-bedecked room. Sally still insisted that Jake had probably once secured the minister, but had afterward "lost

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him.” She seemed to think that a minister might be lost something like a thimble or a jack-knife.

When it lacked but a quarter to eight, even Mr. Ayer could not pretend to read his paper any more. Ten minutes later and Sally was quite rigid in her gay gown, sitting in the back of the room. When the twins were not running into the house to announce that they had been listening and could n’t hear nawthin’, they were dashing out to listen. Once I went to the stoop. There was not a sound, save the mysterious mountain sounds. There was a faint glow behind Busbee, showing where the moon was.

Ristus was standing on the stoop. He had been invited to remain and witness the ceremony. Ole Pink’s baby was asleep on our bed. He expressed great sympathy for Sally. He said it must be

jist awful ter be marrit, but it must be awfuller ter think yer gwine ter be marrit, and then not be marrit arfter all. He offered to go out looking for Jake.

Sally had come to the door and overheard this last remark. She said we might leave Jake to her. There was that in her voice and manner that made us all well content that Jake should be left to her.

After this, time seemed to fly. It became nine o'clock very soon. Mr. Ayer kept piling the wood on the fire, and the flames made the green festoons look very lovely ; but what was their loveliness but a mockery ? We were part of a Bridal Party, with a Missing Groom. We almost felt as if we were portions of an illustrated sensational story. Involuntarily I began to make headings for chapters — I composed some extremely good headings.

The clock struck ten. I asked Mr. Ayer in a whisper what he thought was the matter. He said he thought the matter was that Jake had got drunk in Asheville and would not be able to get out of that city before the next day. He further said that sometimes Jake took a glass, and if he took one he always took a great many more.

At eleven o'clock Sally rose and went out without speaking. Ristus took the baby and departed in the moonlight for the hovel where he lived.

In a few moments Sally returned in her old dress. She had a large, thick comforter in her arms. She asked permission to "wrap it 'bout her an' lay ' on our floor.

So we all retired. The dogs were evidently greatly confused that, after all this preparation, nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XII

Capturing the Bridegroom.

IT proved such exhausting work to wait for a bridegroom who did not come that we all slept rather late the next morning. Even Sally, worn out by the hard labor and the anxiety of the day before, snored on until after sunrise on the floor in our room. I was the first one who rose. I carefully stepped over the yellow woman and went out on the stoop, heavily wrapped in a shawl. I knew what a resplendent pageant the sun made in the morning among these hills, — a shifting glory, whose “smiting beauty” was almost too much for mortal eyes to bear.

I had not been on the stoop five minutes before I heard steps from the direction of the valley, where the winding, more solid wall of mist showed the course of the French Broad. I had hardly said to myself, "It is Jake," when a magnified figure came in sight, and I saw that it was not Jake, but Ristus, and Ristus without the baby.

I had not yet become accustomed to the metamorphosis which trousers and a hat had made in the lad, and was absorbed in admiration every time I met him. As he came nearer now, however, I forgot my admiration in curiosity when I noted the gravity and the burden on the boy's face. He took off his hat, and I saw that his charming love locks were more rough than usual and were wet with the fog.

"Is anything the matter with the baby?" I asked, quickly.

"Now 'm, I reckon not. I left her 'sleep. I did n't come 'bout her. I come 'bout —" Here he lowered his voice to almost a whisper and beckoned me away from the house. I followed him, step by step, until we were out beside the path that seemed to pitch off, in the mist, into space.

"I 'm mighty glad yer war out," he said, impressively. He raised his hand and pointed solemnly off down the mountain, his young, sweet face filled with awe and interest. "He 's thur; he 's down yan, — ter my house; I mean, ter Ole Pink's ole house; he 's thur."

"Who 's there?" I asked, almost as much impressed as my companion. "I don't know whom you mean."

"I mean thur bridegroom," with intense solemnity, as if he were quoting from the Book of Revelations; and I am

sure he was thinking of what he had heard preachers read from that book.

I repeated his words in bewilderment.

“Yes-um,” he said, “Long Black Jake. They called him the bridegroom larst night, yer know. He ’s down thur. I foun’ him er loppin’ on thur roughness when I gurt home after I lef’ hyar. I ’d jes put thur babby on the bed when I heard er groanin’ an’ er sobbin’. I ’low I war scart. I das n’t ter go outer thur cabin for some time. Then I thought ef ’t warn’t er sperit, and war er human, it ’d be mighty mean er me not ter be er helpin’. I shook so ’s I c’d hardly go, but I went. I foun’ Jake. He war soaked in whiskey. He did n’t know nothin’. I gurt him in, an’ I put him on the bed with thur babby. I made er big fire, an’ I sot urp, fur thur wa’ n’t no chance for me tu go tur bed ; ’t aint

'er very wide bed, yer know; but it's er good bed, — what there is of hit. I never saw nothin' sleep's he did, an' thur cabin never had more whiskey smell in hit, even when Ole Pink were full er whiskey; an' I thought no critter could hold's much whiskey as Ole Pink. I've smelled er mighty sight er whiskey 'n my life."

Ristus paused a moment to contemplate the whiskey he had smelled. But he soon added with even increased solemnity: —

"But he's erwake now, an' he says he's er dyin'. An' he carn't noways die 'thout gittin' Sally's furgiveness. That's why I come now. An' he says he did git thur minister, an' then he took jis one glass with thur minister, an' then he lost thur minister. He says he never took but one glass. But he's er dyin' now; leastways he says he is."

I said that I would get Sally immediately. I went back to the cabin and roused her, for she still slept. Directly she was awake she rose to her feet; stretched her arms above her head; saw the festoons of green; suddenly assumed an alert attitude, and said she should "meck er soon start for Asheville, ter fin' dat bawdacious nigger."

I informed her, without any preamble to spare her feelings, that Black Jake was at the hut where Ristus lived, and that he had sent word he was dying, but must first have her forgiveness.

Sally stood looking at me sharply. I don't know what she saw in my face, but she tossed up her head and laughed scornfully.

She hurriedly twisted a handkerchief round her head, and went to the door saying, "Whar be dat Ristus?"

He was waiting. Sally stood up very straight and grand on the stoop. Her large, handsome mouth curled as she spoke.

“Yo’, Ristus, yo’,” she said, “gwi back ’n’ tell Long Black Jake, ef he ain’t daid, dat I come an’ furgive him soon’s I fin’ dat minister he los’ lars’ night. P’raps I sha’n’t git back wiv my forgiveness befo’ evenin’. Tell him he jes stay ’live twel den. Ef I don’t marry him fust, den I marry him lars’. I marry him, any way. I don’t take no ’sultin’ fum no nigger. Yo’ tell him ter keep fum bein’ daid twel I come.”

By this time the rest of the household were up, listening and looking. A bar of sunlight fell through the mist upon Sally as she stood with her arm extended, motioning Ristus to go. The boy hesitated, but finally disappeared in the rolling

fog. Then Sally turned to me and said with rising inflection : —

“He got drunk?”

I nodded. She laughed. She girded her old shawl about her stately shoulders, told Mrs. Ayer that she would be in the log house in time to cook our supper, and walked off. As we all watched her, Mr. Ayer remarked that, if he were Jake, he did not know whether he should stay alive or get daid under the circumstances.

Ristus did not return to do the chores. About the middle of the forenoon Mrs. Ayer, who is very tender-hearted, decided that it was inhuman not to go down and see if Jake and the boy needed anything. She filled a basket with food, and we, with the twins and dogs, set out. It was down hill all the way, and some of it so steep that it required a good deal of holding back on our part to prevent our

going headlong. The clear sun shone warm upon us in the sheltered places, and it was difficult to believe that it was December.

Ole Pink's cabin stood bleak and bare near its group of deadened trees. As we came nearer we saw that the baby was sitting on a heap of dry leaves just outside the door. Approaching yet nearer we heard Black Jake's voice raised in lamentation and groans. As it ceased there came the sound of Ristus speaking.

“ I 'd shut up my howlin', ef I war yer, Jake,” he was saying. “ Yer one of um as wor allers gwine ter preachin' an' bein' pious. Now 's jes thur time ter hev 'ligion kinder tell. Ez fur me, I don't warnt no 'ligion thet ain't of no use. I gurt sick er preachin'. But I hev meetin's with thur Lord out hyar when I 'm 'lone. I hed ter hev somebody when I

tuk that babby, an' thur warn't noan fur a feller like me ter hev but the Lord. Yer see, sence I hed the chile I've got more intimate like with thur Lord."

It was impossible to tell what effect these words from Ristus had upon the negro, for he began to howl and groan again the moment the boy ceased speaking. The dogs dashed into the hut, then the twins ; lastly we followed.

Jake lay on the bed. Ristus was watching a blackened old saucepan which was set on a bed of coals drawn out from the fire. He greeted us with his usual simplicity, but was absorbed in attending to the saucepan. He explained that it contained coffee. He had found some among Ole Pink's things and he was brewing it for Jake. He said Ole Pink always wanted it after she had been drunk.

Hearing the word "drunk," Black Jake raised himself on his elbow and proclaimed amid sobs and tears that he had not been drunk, that he had only taken one glass with the minister. Then he went maundering on about the probability that he had committed the unpardonable sin and that God could never forgive him, let alone Sally. No one noticed him. I watched Ristus, who went on serenely brewing his coffee. When Mrs. Ayer began to unpack her basket the boy's face lighted beautifully. He said he reckoned he would give one er thur little cakes to the babby, and he did so, then returned to the fire.

Very soon there was quite a bounteous repast served. It was wonderful to see Black Jake eat and drink, and almost as wonderful to see Ristus. But Ristus did not forget to feed the baby, who finally

sank back on the floor of the cabin motionless from repletion. Ristus threw his old coat over her and then continued eating. It seemed to me that Jake must die of apoplexy in spite of his longness and his thinness. But all through his enormous meal he kept up the airs of an invalid. He continued to half recline on his couch. He would groan as often as he could think to do so. Several times he remarked that he must try "ter eat sumpin' fur ter keep his stren'th up." He told us "lars' night's sickness had took his stren'th 'way pow'ful."

Amabel advised him to eat to live. He seemed grateful to her for that remark. He said: "Dat war er fac'; no nigger could git erway fum er fac' like dat. Ristus," he said, "give me dat col' meat. I 'se boun' ter eat ter lib."

He explained to us how he was dying

a short time ago, and he reckoned it a mericle that he was alive now. It was nothing short of an interposition of Providence. He grew more and more talkative. He said he had "jes breshed inter de Valley ob de Shadder ob Death." He reckoned Sally done los' him one time. But now, ef he could on'y eat er remnant er two — why he called his meal a "remnant or two" I could not imagine — "fer to keep urp his stren'th," Sally might still be blessed. He grew quite brave. He affirmed that when Sally knew "ob his breshin' inter -de valley in datter way, she be done struck urp wiv thankfulness." The idea was that Sally would be so filled with gratitude for his preservation that the question of forgiveness would be forgotten.

He sat up a little more on the sack of straw whereon he had been reposing.

He had a rib of beef in one hand and a thick piece of pone in the other, and occasionally he made a gesture with the beef, then with the pone.

“Yo’ see, ladies,” he said, “from my state now, what I mus’ hev suffered. Yo’ don’t tink no common sufferin’s kep’ me erway from my own weddin’? When Sally she come ter see wiv her own eyes, she unnerstan’ —” (here a wave of the beef); “she wor no fule when she pomus ter marry me, I tell yo’ —” (a wave with the pone). “Sally be mighty tankful I’s live ’t all. Sally tank de Lord —” he raised both the pone and the beef, glanced at the door, dropped his hands, and sank back collapsed on the bed.

We all turned and looked where Jake was steadily gazing. Sally was in the doorway. Behind her tall stature, and looking very small indeed, we had a

glimpse of a young man in a white necktie. Sally walked in and the young man followed her. He was "bright" colored, having less negro blood in him than had Sally.

"I foun' dis gen'lman ter de Junction," said Sally addressing the assembled people in the cabin. "So's I didn't hev ter go ter Asheville. He jes fum Shiloh. He's er ordained man. I s'pose you'se ready, Jake?"

She looked down at Jake, who was huddled on the bed as if he were an insect.

"I'se been 'bout daid," began Jake feebly.

"Long's yer ain't daid, stan' urp," said Sally unequivocally.

Notwithstanding Jake's hesitation, his face showed that, with all his fear, he was glad to see Sally.

Jake got up as far as to be on his knees. In this position he clasped his hands and mumbled something about "forgiveness."

"I'll marry yo' fus' an' I'll forgive yo' arfter," said Sally. "Stan' urp."

Jake rose to his full height. Then, as his custom was when embarrassed, he sank and rose twice before he seemed to be able to maintain his position.

It was not five minutes later before the little minister from Shiloh had made the two man and wife, and in that brief time Jake had so revived that he was smiling very broadly by the time the ceremony was finished.

"Now," said Sally, "yo' jes go 'bout yer work an' I'll go 'bout mine. I'se got er pow'ful heap er work ter do fur Miss Ayer 'fore night. G'long!"

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Jake did not dare to hesitate. But he went very slowly out of the cabin. He turned back once, but Sally was standing just outside and motioned for him to go on, and he went on.

The yellow woman returned to us. She put her head back and laughed.

“Law me!” she exclaimed, “t’aint no way ter begin er knucklin’ down ter er man. No way, datter way ain’t. Jis tek yer stan’ and stan’ dar. Dat’s my way. I know um. It’s good fur um ter be trod onder. Keep um down. Yo’ kin be good ter um now an’ den, but not oftener. Don’t do. Dey gits de upper han’s, den yo’ ain’t nowhar. Now, my way is ter hev de upper han’s myse’f.”

She spread out her well-formed, strong hands with a fine movement. She laughed again, then she walked away up the hill toward Mrs. Ayer’s.

CHAPTER XIII

The Phantom Portrait

CHRISTMAS day passed with extreme quietness on our mountain. Everybody who could do so went to Asheville. On the path which circles round below us we saw, about sunrise, several carts moving toward the town ; they came from farms even more remote than ours, and were going to the State Road by the nearest ways, bumping and sidling about among the deep ruts. On the bottom of each cart were seated the women with their babies. They were chewing snuff and calling to each other in their flat, nasal voices that seem as devoid of ex-

pression as do their yellow, thin faces. I have not seen a fat mountain woman. Evidently this region and this way of life are not favorable to the secretion of adipose tissue.

Amabel and I wandered out upon the cart-path that we might see these people. We met two men on fine-looking horses, each man having a woman behind him, clasping him about the waist. Each woman had on a white apron with a ruffle at the bottom of it. As they came opposite, the men took off their hats, and the women said "Howdy?" staring persistently, as we also did. In one of the carts, with three other women almost as repulsive, I felt sure I saw Ole Pink. Her head was set far back in a dingy sunbonnet and she scrupulously continued to look the other way after her first glance at us; but it was Ole Pink. Sally and

her new husband had started long ago for the walk to Asheville. Sally said she would be back in time to make us egg-nog in the evening ; we knew better than that. A few broad-hatted mountaineers, with guns in the hollow of the arm came loping toward us from the long vista of the path, crossing light and shade in the most picturesque manner. Almost everything is picturesque here. Squalor often enough has the picture element in it, but the thrifty country is more rarely the place for the artist.

We never go to walk without finding broad flakes of mica glittering in the loose soil. Amabel professed to be greatly astonished at this. She declared that she did not know that mica grew in this way, but had thought it was manufactured. She seemed perfectly reckless in thus proclaiming her ignorance of geology.

The twins assured us that it had growed on these mountings sence afore they was borned ; there was a right smart of it everywhere.

The twins had joined us in this stroll, bursting out of the woods with the dogs, and rushing around us like hurricanes, but with shrieks and laughter like children.

It was on this occasion that we made what seemed to us a very singular discovery, or rather the twins made the discovery, and shouted to us, dancing up and down in their excitement. They stood by the stump of an enormous white oak which had been sawn down ; consequently the stump had a broad smooth surface.

Ella pointed a dingy finger at Amabel while she screamed “ It’s her ! It’s her ! Jis luke at it ! ” and then Ellen extended her finger and echoed the tone and the words.

We supposed it was some poor jest that was enacting, and we were very leisurely in approaching, while the children danced in impish impatience, and the dogs nosed around the roots. The twins appeared to regard their discovery in the light of something miraculous.

When at last we reached the spot I was inclined to the idea of a miracle myself, for there was sketched, on the top of the stump, the full-length figure of a woman, in a round hat with face turned aside. The lines were of the very fewest and roughest ; it was not much more than the hint of a sketch, with no technical skill in it, but the figure and the attitude were unmistakably the figure and the attitude of Amabel, who stood now, quite stiff with surprise, gazing at the stump. The work was evidently done with a bit of half-burnt wood. Indeed, the black stick was

dropped near, and Little Bull was at this moment turning it over with his nose.

My friend looked frightened and I also felt a sense of something eerie hanging about us. At last I suggested to Amabel that she must have a lover among these mountains. She held up her hand to stop me. I had never seen her look more serious.

“Don’t make light of this,” she said. “It must be a warning. It’s a forerunner.”

“A forerunner of what?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps of the shakes ; or a rattlesnake bite ; or that I’m going to be a snuff chewer.”

She looked again at the picture with absolute terror in her face. But she could not tell, as we could, how very like the sketch was to her. After the twins had gazed at us a moment, a look of fear came

into their expression. As we at last walked homeward they kept glancing back, as if the thing on the stump would rise up and pursue us. I was conscious of a reciprocal sensation; and yet, now that I could not see the sketch, I began to doubt whether I had seen it at all. Was it possible that there was an outline portrait of my friend on the top of a stump here on a North Carolina mountain? I laughed at my fancies. I fugitively glanced at Amabel and was not cheered by her awe-struck countenance. When we had gone a little farther my companion asked me if I believed in Spiritualism; if I had ever entered into psychic research, and what I thought of the astral body. These questions helped to cast a gloom upon the benignant winter sunshine. I did not go by a large tree on the way to the cabin without imagining that tree

sawn down and a charcoal sketch upon the stump; perhaps a sketch of me. What was I that I was not as likely to be taken in this way as any one? Nay, perhaps already there was a smooth stump in North Carolina woods with myself in black and white upon it. And what a touch of skill there was in the lines! Altogether this discovery was mysterious and charming, and somehow dreadful.

Amabel and I agreed that if the twins had not known, we would, for the present, have kept the affair a secret, while we made stealthy investigations. But the twins did know, and they proclaimed their knowledge the moment they stepped foot in the cabin.

What they said was that “thur war er pictur er Miss Am’bel in thur woods, an’ they reckoned the devil must er done

hit with er stick outer his fire ; an' should n't they go ter the Junction fur er preacher ? ”

It was not to be wondered at that Mrs. Ayer was bewildered, and she continued bewildered when we had made all the explanation possible. After an animated discussion of the subject, Mrs. Ayer made the only sensible remark which had yet been spoken. She said that probably one of the northern artists who come to these mountains for “material” had done this thing. This, indeed, was reasonable ; but in my secret heart I did not accept these reasonable words. What truly feminine soul would immediately have given up all the glamour of mystery connected with the discovery of that sketch ? And was it likely that a northern artist would have spent a moment in the delineation of a figure which had nothing

“local” about it? Besides, the thing was not the work of an artist, it was the work of an ignorant hand with a natural “gift.” Before the sun had set we had taken Mrs. Ayer to view our discovery. We were gratified to see that it made as strong an impression upon her as it had done upon us. She stood with dropped chin gazing from it to Amabel, and then back again. She ejaculated that she had had no idea! As we walked back from this second visit to what Amabel called The Stump, Amabel again fell to discussing the subject of the astral body. She said she was not very clear in her ideas as to what an astral body was, but she did not suppose any one could have clear ideas on that topic. Still, if she thought anything, she guessed she thought that the sketch on The Stump was made by spirit hands and referred in some

inscrutable way to her own astral body. She wished she could find a medium at a moment when all the conditions should happen to be right, both in this world and the next, so that the medium might explain about that picture. Did they have mediums in Asheville? But if they did have them she did not suppose the conditions would be right, there would be an electric current somewhere where there ought not to be one, or there would not be one where it was proper an electric current should be, and so the medium would be obliged to try again — for a consideration. She wished now she had studied more into psychic research, that winter she had been in Boston; but naturally she had not contemplated any such circumstance as this. There was, however, no telling when a person might stand in need of knowledge about psychic things; a person

might want that kind of knowledge all in a flash, as you needed a pistol when a burglar entered your room at midnight. She said we might laugh at her if we chose, but she guessed if we ever found our portraits on stumps we should wish we could find out what occult power had done the work.

It was thus my friend prattled as we toiled over the rough mountain side on our return, stopping occasionally to pick up a particularly fine piece of mica, or to poke over the dark earth in search of one of those rare gems which are sometimes found here. A bit of mica is not good for anything under the sun, but one has to secure it all the same.

Since we have made the discovery concerning the sketch, not a day has passed that we have failed to visit what is usually known among us as the "phantom por-

trait." Every time we start forth from the cabin we go with a feeling that something may happen when we get to the stump. It would be hard to tell what it is we expect to happen. There is a delightful palpitation in our pulses when we catch the first glimpse of the place. We look at each other. Has there been any change? The dogs know exactly where we are going, but they seem to have no sense of the mysterious, they have concluded that it is only a common stump, and they are sorry for us that we think it is anything more.

The sketch has become much obscured in a pouring rain we have had since Christmas. Very soon there will be no sketch there. But we can always know that there has been one.

I should hardly have dared to say so much about this particular incident if

something had not at last happened upon one of our visits to this spot.

Before we could see the place yesterday we heard the dogs barking frantically. They had gone on ahead of us, and of course were on the spot. They bark a good deal when human reason can find no cause for such barking. This time, however, there was something in their tones which thrilled us with expectation. We even paused, undecided whether to go on or not. But curiosity was stronger than fear. We came out upon an opening from whence the dogs were visible. There was a man sitting on the portrait stump. Does this seem a very small announcement to make? You may be sure the fact was not small to us. This man was plainly from the enlightened regions of the world. He might even have come from New York. He did not see us. He was absorbed by the

dogs. He wore a corduroy cap; his long, many-pocketed ulster was opened and revealed a velvet coat, and a watch-chain with charms attached. His entire suit was made of too large a checked cloth. He had rather long gray hair, a very long gray moustache curled up at the ends, and a little pointed beard. His eyelids were swollen, and his cheeks puffy under his eyes. His gloves lay on the ground at his feet. He had a sketching pad on his knees, but his attention was given to the dogs. We had time to study him quite exhaustively, and were about going away, thinking we had found the maker of our sketch, when he turned, saw us, instantly rose, and took off his cap.

CHAPTER XIV

The Man in the Ulster

AT the moment when the man in the ulster rose and took off his cap we felt as if something out of a novel were going to happen, or that it would be only just to circumstances that something should happen. In view of all possibilities I could have wished that the cheeks of this person had been less suggestively puffy. Still, he removed his cap with a quite bewitching flourish, and bowed so low that if he had gone one inch nearer the ground his salutation would have been a burlesque. As it was, in his way he appeared to be as respectful as the twins were in their way. The intentness of

his look was given to Amabel; he naturally recognized that he had just been sitting on her portrait. His remark threw us back again into the darkness of our ignorance concerning the picture.

He said, of course it was I who had thus caught the likeness of my friend. He congratulated me. He took off his hat again. I told him timidly that we had just now supposed this was his work.

He smiled in a large manner. He thanked me. He explained that, though he was an artist, he had not been in this spot for fifteen years, or thereabouts. He looked about him as if he paid a compliment to the scenery by admiring it.

I was watching this stranger, feeling in a dim way that he reminded me of some one.

He buttoned his ulster and put his sketching pad in his pocket. He talked all the time in rather a husky voice. Would we be kind enough to tell him where we were staying? Thanks. He hoped to meet us again. He was in Asheville. He should take means to see us. He complimented me on my artistic ability, assuming still that I had done the sketch. "Crude, certainly, but having power." With another sweeping bow he walked away toward the State Road.

It is true there had been no rescue of anybody, but how excitingly near the verge of something we seemed to be! It was comforting to remember that in these days rescues are no longer necessary. The modern novel has no rescues. It hardly has anything so striking as the meeting with a man who wears long gray moustachios. Long gray moustachios

verge too much on the romantic ; they detract from the realistic.

We lingered long on our return walk. When at last we came in sight of the Ayer cabin we saw Sally's tall figure coming toward us with such celerity of movement and energy of gesture that we knew something had transpired.

She struck her hands together as she explained : —

“ I done ben lookin' all ober de farm fur you-uns. Jake, he's I dunno whar ; Mr. Ayer he's ter de Junction ; de twins ain't no 'count, an' are jes er flyin' roun' on dere heads an urpsettin' their se'fs' an' everybuddy else off dere laigs. Mrs. Ayer she doin' what one woman kin, but one woman carn't meek er worl' an' set broken laigs an' arms besides, kin she ? An' 't ain't ter our cabin, nuther.”

Naturally these words gave us no lucid

idea of anything. She turned and began to stride rapidly along, while we followed. She reached Mrs. Ayer's barn, led out a horse and began saddling it. She was muttering to herself about no one's knowing nuthin', an' she an' Mrs. Ayer could n't meek er worl', nohow.

In a twinkling the side-saddle was on, the girths fastened, the bridle adjusted. She turned to me. She said I was the best rider and I was to "git urp."

I never thought of resisting. She held out her hands and nearly lifted me into my seat. She pulled down my skirts, she tore a switch from a peach-tree close to us. She had a force and a magnetism which I have never seen equalled.

"Now don't yo' spare dat mare!" she said.

Amabel reached out her hand and grasped the bridle.

“Do you know where you are going?” she asked with energy.

I looked helplessly at Sally, whose handsome face unbent into a swift laugh.

“I’m er bawdacious fool!” she said. “I done thought I tole yo’. Yo’ gwi’ straight ter Asheville fur er doctor ter come quick. Man broke every bone in him down yan,” flinging out her hand, “clus by Ole Pink’s house, yo’ know. I foun’ him. I run fur Mrs. Ayer. Carn’t fin’ even dat Ristus. Carn’t fin’ nobuddy. Gwine ter try. Carn’t stan’ er chatterin’.”

Again she waved her hand, — this time for me to go, and I started, experiencing a pleasurable excitement. I hope the pleasure did not arise from the fact that a man had broken every bone in him “down yan.”

Not until the mare was cantering along the State Road did it occur to me who it was who had been hurt. But of course the fair reader has already guessed that it was the artist with the picturesque moustache. The fair reader is right. It was he.

I conducted the doctor back along the bewildering tangle of mountain roads to Ole Pink's cabin. As we approached, Sally came forth. She had succeeded in finding a couple of big, loosely-built mountaineers, and they had carried the stranger into this cabin and put him on that sack of straw which Ristus called a "good bed what thur was of hit."

These two men were now near the ash-hopper, straddling about, occasionally speaking a brief word, or nodding to a word that had been spoken.

We heard a voice inside the cabin

groaning and swearing. The swearing appeared to give the mountain men a grim satisfaction. I was left alone with these men. I questioned one of them. He told me he had no acquaintance with "thur fellow as had broke hisself all up, but from thur heap er pockets in his coat, an' other signs, he reckoned he war er Yank. Er painter feller, likely. Painter fellers come hyar now an' then. Thur war all kinds of folks in thur world, painters with thur rest."

Having said this he left me alone. I sat down upon a fallen dead tree and gave myself up to gloom. The sun was now clouded. The groans and cursing in the cabin had ceased.

Presently I saw Ristus coming up from a deeper depth in the valley. He had a large tin bucket of water in one hand. The baby was on his other arm. He

left the bucket at the door of the hut, then came to me.

“I war sant fur water,” he said, sitting down on the log. He took off his hat and drew his sleeve across his wet forehead. He had been toiling a long way with his two burdens and his fair face was flushed deeply.

“Do yer know what he is?” he said with a tragic emphasis, pointing toward the hut.

I shook my head. I did not understand.

Ristus drew nearer in growing excitement. The baby wailed, yet he did not seem to hear it. I took the child in my arms.

“I know,” said the boy. “I saw what war in his pockits. He paints. He drors. He makes picters outer them mountings, — them glories everlastin’ an’ unspeakable.”

Ristus's face began to shine and his voice to tremble. The innocence and the sweetness of him seemed suddenly infused with an enthusiastic strength.

He was standing now, and looking off down the valley which, at the end, seemed blocked in by illimitable mountains.

"He kin dror them," he said, with long, indrawn breath. "Jis ter think of hit! I hain't never had nowthin' ter work with, on'y bits er brown paper, an' burnt sticks, an' sich. I ain't gurt no show, I hain't. I pray Godermighty that He'll give me jis one grain of er show. I feel hit in me as I could paint an' dror. But how kin I do hit with on'y them?"

As he spoke the last words he turned intensely toward me and held out his grimy hands with a quick gesture.

My excitement was now almost as great as his. The baby slipped from my hold to the ground and began to grovel and gurgle in the dirt unheeded.

“It is you who drew that sketch on the stump, — that sketch of Amabel !” I cried out.

The lad’s face became burning red. His lips quivered as he looked down at me.

“Did yer know ’t war Miss Am’bel ?” he asked, tremulously.

“Know it ? It was unmistakable.”

He clasped his hands. He was silent for a long time, looking off at that mountain guard of the valley. The child crawled away and dabbled her fingers in the lye which had dripped from the hopper.

I watched the face from which the broad hat was turned back.

Finally he looked at me.

“Yer know,” he said softly, “as Miss Am’bel ben kind of er angel ter me. Yer ’member these yer trouses,” glancing at his legs with a touching expression of pride. “Ef it had n’t er ben fur her I never ’d er had trouses. An’ thur’s sumpin’ ’bout her more ’n trouses; kind of er smile; sumpin’ kind er softly, yer know — ?”

He hesitated, and his silence asked me if I understood. Ah, yes, I knew. I nodded my head. He went on.

“I ben tryin’ ter dror her. Arfter thur trouses I could n’t seem ter dror nowthin’ else fur er spell. “I’ve gurt er picture I’ll show yer sometime. Yer see,” — with a still gentler intonation, — “yer see, I lurv her. Thur never war nobody ben thataway ter me afore. Yesum; I kep’ er drorin’ of her. But I reckon no man, not even him,” —

with a look at the hut, — could dror Miss Am'bel's smile, an' that look inter her eyes when she's sorry fur a feller."

Mr. Ayer says things seem to be concentrating about our mountain. First there were twins; then there was Ole Pink's baby; then there was a phantom portrait; now there is a long-limbed artist laid up in that hut in the valley. And there might have been a redbird. And there was Yaller-tail. Pre-eminent just now is the interest in the stranger, whose name is Sartain. He had attempted to run down a steep incline, had caught his foot, rolled and bumped and come off with bruises and broken bones. Or, rather, he had not come off at all, but had remained helpless and senseless on the field, and been found by Sally, who was established as nurse in the desolate cabin, with Ristus to help.

The doctor could not yet tell how badly the man was hurt. Meanwhile Mr. Sartain suffered so much pain and swore so much that he was mercifully kept a good deal under the influence of an opiate.

“Law me!” said Sally, “dem ole logs in dat cabin jes crack wiv his sw’arin’. Neber heard so much sw’arin’ in er minute’s I heard fum dat gen’l’mán.”

She grinned with reprehensible satisfaction in the profanity.

She had come up to Mrs. Ayer’s for some articles. She had them in a large basket on her head, and, as she started, she turned and looked at me in a way that made me follow her. When I reached her side she said in a whisper:—

“Dat Ristus done b’witched wiv de gen’l’mán. He jes under er spell. I got eyes. I see what’s under my

nose.” She came yet nearer. “Yo’ notice who Ristus look like?”

The start I gave was so melodramatic that it was quite satisfactory to the yellow woman. I recalled that I had fancied there was in Mr. Sartain’s face a resemblance to something, I had not known what. Now I knew. One face was pallid and bore the marks of dissipation, but in it there was an indescribable look like the undefiled face of the boy.

Sally repeated that she had eyes. She said I “orter see de gen’l’mán look, an’ look, at Ristus, when he wa’n’t asleep wiv de medicine.”

I did not then discuss the matter with her or with any one.

I had made a great effect when I had disclosed the identity of the stump-sketch maker.

“Now I know why I always wanted

to paint Ristus in the midst of pond-lilies," cried Mrs. Ayer with fervor. "Ristus!" she ejaculated. "I ought to have known!"

The twins stood about all over the room and kept discharging exclamations. Ella asked unheeded, "Do they pay money for sich?" and Ellen propounded the query, "Will they try fur ter curt off thur top er thur stump?"

I could hardly have created more surprise had I announced that Buster had made that sketch. Mrs. Ayer, after the first tumult had subsided, kept saying:—

"Ah, that accounts, that accounts," until her husband finally turned to her and asked rather sharply:—

"Accounts for what?"

"For his face, you know," replied the lady in a somewhat rapt manner. "Oh, I could tell you, but you ought to know."

It is such a satisfaction to have Ristus's face accounted for."

Mr. Ayer smiled. He said he had known very good painters who never could have looked in the least like Ristus; whereupon Mrs. Ayer remarked that men did n't know anything any way.

We all contributed that day to the purchase of a simple outfit of sketching materials for our young artist, and Mr. Ayer drove into Asheville to buy them.

After he had gone Amabel and I went down to the hut where the injured man lay. We stood at the door, and, looking in, saw Ristus sitting by the bed on a stool which he must have fashioned himself. The always-present baby was crawling as near the fire as she dared to go, and was contentedly sucking a fragment of bacon-rind. Sally was crouching over something she was cooking at

one end of the big hearth. Buster, who had recently elected to stay and guard this place, came forward to meet us, wagging cheerfully. On the bed a figure was lying motionless, save for an occasional weak and unconscious movement of one hand, which lay outside the covering.

Ristus looked up, nodded, but did not rise. He seemed absorbed. I thought of Sally's assertion that he was under a spell.

At last the yellow woman turned and saw us. She was very grave. She left the cabin and walked with us a few rods in the path which led to Mrs. Ayer's. Suddenly she stood still.

"Doctor jes gone when yo' ladies come," she said. "He say 'tain't no use. Mr. Sartain carn't lars' mo'n er day er two. Intunnul sumpin' as is wuss 'n de broke bones. Says crooil ter try ter move him. Says he carn't fin' out

nawthin' ter de hotel, on'y name, — Richard Sartain. Carn't sen' fur no frien's; dunno wh'ar ter sen', yo' see. He look ter me like er man as live fur hisse'f, mos'ly. He gotter die fur hisse'f now. Dis mawnin' he rouse urp er bit an' I arst him ef I should git er minister. Then he turned his eyes onter Ristus, who don't stir fum him, an' looked an' looked at him. I never seen no sich er look. An' den he say 'Boy, yo' jes stay by me twell de end.' Den he shet his eyes an' gwi ter sleep er 'gin. He made no arnser 'bout de preacher."

Sally sat down on a log. She put her hands over her face and rocked herself to and fro, the vivid sunshine falling on her.

Soon she rose and asked us if we would sit in the hut while she went up to do a few things for Jake in her own cabin. We should not be obliged to do

anything. "The gen'l'man he on'y jes slep', an' slep'."

We went back to the hut while she climbed the mountain.

The widely-opened door let in a broad bar of sunlight which nearly filled the squalid place, and lay on the head and shoulders of the man upon the bed on the floor. His long white hands were still outside the quilt; on one of them was a ring holding an immense stone with some character cut in it. Sometimes, as he moved his hands, the gold would glint with a brightness that made one shrink, it seemed so full of a mocking life. There was a bandage round the forehead, but the rest of the face was visible.

As we sat there in perfect stillness my eyes wandered about the room. It did not look like a room, — more like a hole.

One of Mr. Sartain's gloves was lying beside Buster, and he had evidently been chewing it. Twice within a quarter of an hour Buster had noiselessly risen and walked to a covered saucepan on the hearth and put his nose to it. Each time he had done this Amabel had lifted her hand forbiddingly, and the dog had looked at her with a look which said plainly : " You are entirely mistaken if you think I smelled of the saucepan," and had returned and lain down with an appearance of extreme rectitude.

There was no change for an hour in the attitude of Ristus or the sick man. The sunlight crept more and more on to the pallet of straw, and warmed brightly the boy's yellow hair, which hung, rough and tangled, on his shoulders. Outside, a large gray squirrel came and sat on its haunches on the stump that was rotting

down close to the door. Buster was asleep and did not see it.

After a time the man moved and uttered an inarticulate sound. The squirrel fled, making a vanishing gray streak out of sight.

The dog opened his eyes. Amabel and I rose to our feet. There seemed not to be a sound in the valley save a soughing noise in the tops of some trees near.

We stood looking at that face on the pillow. The eyes opened with a quiet sane look in them; a look which made me think that Sally had been mistaken about the hopelessness of the case.

His gaze turned toward Ristus, and the stranger smiled very slightly under the great moustache. The boy bent forward with his hands clasped tightly. He laughed softly as he said, just above his breath: —

“Yer be better, suh, shore’s thur world.”

Mr. Sartain did not reply. He continued looking at the boy.

When he spoke it was distinctly, with no feebleness in his tone.

“Your mother’s eyes, boy; your mother’s eyes; warm-tinted, lovely.”

Ristus nodded, but plainly could grasp no meaning in the words.

“Every dog has his day, my lad,” went on Mr. Sartain. “I had mine, but it ended a good while ago. She loved me — your mother. I loved, and I rode away — after a while.” He said this almost airily.

“We had a pleasant summer among the mountains. But it soon passed. Everything passes” — he waved his hand feebly. “I never knew what became of her. They said she married a mountain fellow, and soon died. She died.”

A sudden, strange look swept over the once handsome face. The man tried to raise himself, and Ristus tried to help him.

“Did I say she died?” cried the voice, stronger than ever. “She could n’t have died, when here are her eyes before me. I never could paint her eyes. I used to try. Something eluded me. I can do it now. I know just the colors; warm, lovely. Boy, I shall be up in a day or two. I’ll take you with me — just because of your eyes — yes — just because of — ”

Lips and tongue hesitated, and seemed to grope. The head turned slightly, until it rested partly on the shoulder of Ristus, and then was quite still.

The great ring on the motionless white hand shone dazzlingly in the sun.

CHAPTER XV

A Funeral as an Entertainment

THE stranger was buried in a little graveyard on the side of a mountain. The funeral service was held in Ole Pink's cabin, where he died. The hut was crowded with men and women from miles around, and scores of them stood in groups outside, chewing, gazing, talking in low voices, their sallow, bony faces showing a dull, persistent interest. They rode on strange-looking steeds, or, if they could not ride, they walked. Distance could not keep them away, they were bound to come. I lingered for some moments beside two women who wore sunbonnets

and men's coats. I heard one say to the other :

“Ef Ole Pink had er ben hyar she 'd er sont word as he war er dyin'. She knows what 's right in sick times. I hearn nobuddy knew er death war expected. It's er gret loss to we-uns er not knowin'. Thur ain't many died 'thin twenty mile er Busbee that I ain't seen die; no, not in more 'n fifteen year. Yas, Ole Pink 'd er let we-uns know, she would. But that yaller 'oman an' them Yanks from Ayer's — yer carn't expect nawthin' er them. When yer ain't missed er death 'thin more 'n fifteen year, it's urpsettin' ter yer feelin's ter miss one 's nigh 's this 's ben.”

The other woman said whiningly that she could feel for the speaker. Though her own health had n't been so that she could “foller urp thur deaths,” as her

friend had done, still she had “follered um urp” all the Lord had been willing for her to do. She “reckoned thur Lord’s hand war in hit, er keepin’ er poor ’oman on er bed er sickness, so ’s folks died an’ was buried, an’ she not able to stir from her bed. She hoped she believed it was er dispensation, jes’, the preacher said. But dispensations war sometimes mighty hard to bear, an’ she ’d had er heap er dispensations in her life.”

Both women wagged their sunbonnets a good deal as they talked.

I learned that there was a general sense among the people of having been defrauded in that they had not been notified that a death was likely to occur in that miserable hut in the valley. Had they known, they would have flocked thither and waited, with a ghastly eagerness and

interest impossible to understand. Sally knew their customs and had purposely been very reticent. She said she wa'n't er gwine ter have no crowdin' ob pore whites roun' dat cabin; so she kep' things close't.

But they all came to the funeral, even to Mrs. Case, on Yaller-tail, having one child before her on the saddle and one behind. The children should be present at such an entertainment. They all straggled along behind the body as it was borne to its wind-swept, lonely resting place. From that grave could be seen those purple tints on Pisgah; but he who lay there could not see them.

Mrs. Ayer had decided that the twins could not go, but when they were told of this decision they burst into such heart-rending cries of despair that Mrs. Ayer relented. They writhed as they sobbed

out that they "had never ben to no Yank's funeral." They appeared to think that a Yank's funeral would contain elements of interest beyond anything they had ever enjoyed.

They were washed and combed and put into red "tires" and white sunbonnets. When thus arrayed the demureness and the respectability of their appearance were so great that I almost felt as if my own manner must show an unbecoming levity. Their eyes were more round and unwinking than ever, and their little forms appeared to stiffen the moment they were in their red tires.

The intention had been that all the dogs should be imprisoned in the kitchen during the time of the funeral, but when the moment came for their incarceration only Little Bull and Petite were found to be present. Calling for the others did

not bring them. I have yet to know the dog who will be found when he has made up his mind otherwise.

When we came within sight of our destination we saw, among the crowd, Tip and Buster standing with praiseworthy decorousness close to Ristus, who was near that figure which lay in the simple coffin on the rude trestles. The two dogs did not leave the boy's side. Sometimes he would stroke their sleek heads.

There could not be any "mourners" in the conventional sense of the term. Some excitable negroes hung about during the brief ceremonies and sobbed and groaned. Theirs were the only tears shed.

At first we watched Ristus with deep interest. We saw him with that child-like serenity upon him which was

peculiarly his own. He was very sober and greatly impressed, but why should he feel any especial grief? If he had been "under a spell," as Sally had declared, that spell was broken. Still there was something different in his aspect; he looked older.

The yellow woman had undertaken the care of the baby, and there were only the dogs near Ristus.

Thus far it has been without the least success that Mr. Ayer has made inquiries in Asheville concerning Mr. Sartain. He was simply one of the many strangers who came there. He stayed at the Swannanoa Hotel, and registered as from New York. Plainly he can be no famous artist, although among his few effects the pencil and water-color sketches are of great merit, and possess in an uncommon degree what is called "feeling."

It is the strong desire of the women here that Ristus shall come into immediate possession of all that was the stranger's — we say it is justice that the boy should have the clothes, the pictures, the ring, the watch, and the \$200 in money.

Mr. Ayer says that a woman's idea of justice, if carried out, would ruin a country in twelve months. He is going to make still more investigation. He asks by what right we should give Mr. Sartain's effects to Ristus. It is astonishing how cruel men can be.

Mr. Ayer furthermore expresses his belief that the notion that Ristus is Mr. Sartain's son is all bosh. No doubt the man had not been all he ought to have been ; no doubt Ristus had eyes that reminded Sartain, in his last delirium, when his brain was fogged with opiates, of the eyes of some woman. Almost any man

might remember some woman's eyes in that way — here an exclamation from Mrs. Ayer — but as for such fancies being proof of anything, he had never heard a statement more absurd.

And the resemblance that we were all making so much of? He did not see the slightest resemblance.

If I were writing a romance now, I should ordain that Ristus be immediately proved, by convenient papers found in Sartain's luggage, and by equally convenient birthmarks upon the lad, the legitimate son of the artist. Moreover, the artist should have been fabulously wealthy at the time of his death. Then behold Ristus launched upon a tide of golden prosperity. In truth, however, I must write that Ristus appears to be as far from golden prosperity as ever. But he is touchingly happy with his pencils and

colors. Is it not with pencils and colors that he will find his greatest happiness? If he only does not take an unfortunate fancy in the future to some pretty but soulless mountain girl! We women talk over such a possibility and shudder at it. It was yesterday that we were discussing this, and Amabel, after a long silence, announced that she had almost resolved to take Ristus north with her when we return. She looked at me as she said:

“He can do ‘chores’ in our old farmhouse; he can go to school; and we shall not be cruel to him. He will have a chance to grow mentally as well as bodily.” Then she laughed and added that the worst of that would be that his beautiful long hair would have to be clipped close, and how would the boy look with his hair “filed,” for instance. He would only have his eyes left.

Having spoken thus, Amabel again fell into silence, and did not apparently hear Mrs. Ayer say that the worst of that was not the boy's hair, but Ole Pink's baby.

It was at this stage of the conversation that a series of whoops and screams began outside and were kept up until the twins ran over each other into the room. Their stiffness had entirely disappeared with the removal of their red tires.

Being children, and not entirely versed in self-restraint, there were rare moments when one might see their faces without the mask of respectfulness and demureness which fitted so well. This was one of those moments. Now, with no veil to hide it, was visible what I can only call an expression as of a dreadful inherited taint, a something vile that had come down from a long line of ancestors, even

as an aristocratic hand or curl of the upper lip may be inherited. It was a heart-sickening thing to see on these small faces ; it was gone immediately, leaving them with that curious kind of opaqueness which is so puzzling. They now stood staring, but eager. Their thick, dull, light-brown hair had been carefully cut in bangs by Mrs. Ayer. She said she could thus far make them look like Christian children. She could give them bangs. The effect had been striking. It had appeared to change the children into a kind of hybrids. They were quite proud of their bangs. Since having them they had been heard to express unmitigated contempt toward some girls down in some gully whose hair had never been banged, and who had, until educated by Ella and Ellen, been in gross ignorance as to what the word "bang" meant when applied to

human hair. The bangs with which they were profusely acquainted were of a different kind. Ellen once related to me, in that quick, breathless way in which they both talked, the particulars of the blackness of the ignorance of "them gully gals" regarding this fashion of the nineteenth century.

It was a strange fact that this trick of cutting the hair was the only knowledge that struck the children as worth acquiring; the only advantage there was to be gained in living with Mrs. Ayer instead of in different hovels, drudging for this one and that. It was such a life from which they had been taken.

Being asked what they had to tell, they began breathing fast, and talking and stuttering in their haste. We made out that Mr. Ayer had sent them. We heard the words "Ole Pink's baby" and "oats"

and "panthers" and "he said there wa'n't no danger."

The excitement under which they were struggling had now communicated itself to us. We rose when we heard the word "panthers." We did not have panthers in New England. What we were after was everything that was different from what we had in New England. So far we had had great success in this quest.

It was finally gleaned that Mr. Ayer was going "over yan" in the big wagon. He was going to get some bundles of oats. He was going to take Ole Pink's baby and leave it with its mother, who, it was said, was now living "over yan" with "Red Tim." Mr. Ayer had made a rapid decision as soon as he heard that Ole Pink was within a day's journey. He was now about to act upon that decision with his habitual promptness.

He said that Ristus should not be burdened in that way.

We could all go. The children were going. Ristus was going. The dogs were going, with the exception of Petite, who never left her mistress for more than half-an-hour, and Mrs. Ayer and Sally were to stay at home.

We made a "soon start." While Jake was putting the "gears" on the two horses, Sally lifted chairs into the cart, for it was upon chairs we were to sit.

Chairs are very comfortable in a house or upon any motionless surface. I would not wish to dispense with chairs. But when they are standing in a North Carolina cart and the cart is moving over North Carolina mountain roads, and we are on the chairs, the motion is one which calls for great powers of expres-

sion in the author who essays to write a descriptive article.

I must say that those who have sat upon chairs only upon lawns or floors have not the least idea of what those articles are capable when they are put in the way of temptation. They look innocent. They looked innocent even after Sally had set them up in the cart. There were two of them behind the narrow board laid across the front. On this board Mr. Ayer and Ristus, with the baby, were to ride. Amabel and I were to have the chairs. The twins were to sit in the bottom of the cart wherever they chose. The dogs were to run and disport themselves. Happy dogs!

After I had taken my place, with the utmost difficulty, climbing in over the high sides, Buster came and put his front paws on the hub of the wheel,

wagging his tail, while he had an anxious look on his face. I have since thought that he was trying to express his sympathy in view of what was before us. He had lived longer in North Carolina than had we, and he had observed.

While Mr. Ayer and Jake were fastening the last buckles of the gears, Mrs. Ayer came out of the cabin bearing two cushions which she had taken from two rockers.

We disclaimed any such effeminacy, but she insisted. She said that if we would use them skillfully as fenders between us and the chairs they might be the means of saving our lives. She also told us that chairs in carts were the worst demons she had ever known. Cushions might not do much, but then they might do a great deal; just as the pictures of soldiers' sweethearts worn by the soldiers

sometimes prevented bullets from reaching brave hearts.

Amabel protested that only in the light of a substitute for the portrait of a lover would she consent to take her cushion, but I received mine as just simply a cushion.

Then Mrs. Ayer mounted on a wheel and kissed us both. She bade us farewell. She informed us that she hoped to see us again, but she hardly expected a reunion. Amabel said that we would return with our cushions or on them.

Mr. Ayer took the reins and the whip, looked over his shoulder, and suggested that if we were quite through with our parting we would start.

As he spoke, the twins came in at the side of the wagon precisely as cats would have done. We started.

CHAPTER XVI

The End of the Story

IT is now nearly a week since peace unutterable has descended upon this house. In other words, it is nearly a week since the twins ran away. Yes, they have gone. I must say that they greatly interested me. They also appeared to offer me a respect more profound than any ever before laid upon my shrine. Still it is blessed to have them away and to have at the same time the consciousness that we did all we could for them. As I look out of doors from this quiet cabin, I do not see them running up to the barn as if they would hit the side of that building, and would then begin to ricochet

indefinitely. Yes, we have nothing to regret and much for which to be thankful, so far as our own selves are concerned. It is only that we regret for their sakes. We all tried by precept, — and it is to be hoped by example also, — to civilize them. But they would not be civilized. They accepted banded hair, it is true, which is one of the outward signs of enlightenment. They received a kind of veneer, also, which enabled them to practise great deception. They have now taken themselves away. They have also taken other things more valuable to us than their presence, viz.: a little ring with a white topaz set in it, which was dear to me for the sake of a sister who used to wear it when a child. An extremely ornate old cameo pin belonging to Mrs. Ayer. A few handkerchiefs. About three pints of shells culled

from the long beach at Fernandina. Strange to say, they also took a backgammon board, but carefully left the dice and the men. They also selected all the pieces from a set of chess save the pawns. They probably had a natural instinct which despised pawns. They must have been preparing for some time. It is not probable that we yet know all they have carried away. In the future we shall occasionally miss something and then we shall say that "the twins took it," and may thereby do them great injustice.

Among their preparations for departure was a behavior well-nigh irreproachable, with the exception of the noise and confusion which were inseparable from their being. Of late they have entirely given up rising in the evening and toting wood in their night-gowns; they have remembered to tote it before it was time to

assume night-gowns. They have not broken nearly as much crockery, possibly because the remnant of crockery is small. They have not talked in their sleep. They have not forgotten their "larnin' book" and the duties it entails. It has been Amabel's custom to hear these recitations from the "larnin' book." Such recitations were never illuminated by any flashes of embryo intellect. Sometimes Amabel used to ask them to describe certain familiar things. Their descriptions had an unexpectedness unprecedented in my experience. For instance, Ella said that a lamp chimney was something "all niggled at the top," — the "niggled" referring to the scollops which adorned those articles here. Ellen described chin-copins as a nut that was "rounded at one eend an' sorter panted off ter the t'other." As I am not even now acquainted with

chincopins I cannot say if this was correct. They both professed to know where "chincopins were at," — in other words, where they grew. They could always tell when water boiled, because "it kept jumpin' urp an' down." They saw a bicycle in one of their visits to Asheville, and Mrs. Ayer told them what it was. The vehicle greatly impressed them, but they invariably, in speaking of it, called it a "scyamore."

They have gone. I will not try to recite a list of the negative virtues they cultivated a week or two prior to their departure. Was this goodness part of a plan to make us less suspicious? But we had never been suspicious. True, Mrs. Case said long ago that "them twins war er plannin' ter run erway," and Sally has always averred that the children were "double-faced, pore white trash, an'

chokin' full er desate.'" Now they are gone it transpires that there is no one within a dozen miles who could not have told us they were going. At least, so they say.

On the day they left, they were seen by Mrs. Case on the State Road. She was washing at the stream that crosses the road near her house. She informs us that each child had an old flour sack stuffed full of things. Some of these spoils of their recent life must have been their own clothes, for Mrs. Ayer has dressed them comfortably. Mrs. Case furthermore tells us in a manner meant to be commiserating, but really exultant, that the children told her they were running away because they didn't have enough to eat; also they were made to sleep with dogs. This last assertion probably arises from the fact that, after much pleading on their part, Mrs.

Ayer permitted them to have Buster and Tip on their lounge. We have not yet heard of any other grievances which acted as incentives to their flight. We are of the opinion that they have always meant to go, but that the immediate cause was their mother. For they have a mother who lives here and there in different mountain hovels with different men, as does Ole Pink. It is currently reported that this woman has recently affirmed that the "little gals wa'n't gittin' 'nough outer them Yanks." This remark sounds as if the fond parent were not thoroughly satisfied.

Unfortunately for the twins, they met their mother in that hut where Mr. Ayer drove us when we went in the cart to leave Ole Pink's baby with its natural guardian. That journey was a memor-

able one, both as regards our corporeal and spiritual bodies. Our bones will long remember it. Even longer will our minds hold the pictures, magnificent and indescribable, which the mountains and valleys presented to us with almost every rod of the atrocious roads.

There were moments when the chairs on which we sat in the cart were less fiendish in their movements than was their regular habit. It was in such moments of respite that we looked at the views. Always take a cushion or, at least, a folded shawl to serve as a cushion when you intend to occupy a chair in a cart in this portion of this State. As Mrs. Ayer had said, this precaution may save your life. If we had had a hundred lives on this trip they would all have been sacrificed had we not had those cushions. We used them as fenders, shields, bucklers.

We wished they had been as large as the bucklers of old. When they were not absolutely pressed down between us and destruction, we held them poised ready for instant action in the right spot. If my chair showed signs of rushing down to the end of the wagon I faced round that way with my defensive weapon and, at the instant before collision, if I were successful, the cushion received the first strength of the blow which the chair had intended should be spent upon my knees. Naturally a good many times we were not successful, especially at first. By the time we had gone the ten miles our skill in this kind of fencing had greatly increased. It was hard, however, when the chairs decided to rush full tilt at each other. On such occasions one came up the slope of the wagon, which seemed miraculous, while the other performed the natural

action of sliding down. They would meet like two war-horses on the field of battle and would crush hands or legs between them. While we were crying out with the pain the chairs would cavort back again in unmistakable glee. The twins were sitting here and there on the cart bottom, and sometimes they were mowed down relentlessly by our engines of destruction. Once my chair, with me on it, advanced with the rapidity of a cannon ball straight upon Ellen. I had the cushion ready ; I shrieked out a warning. All in vain. The cushion flew out into the mud, Ellen was cut down, and I was flung forward on to Ristus, who was sitting upon the front seat holding the baby. I never knew why we were not all killed. In the midst of the piercing cries of the baby and Ellen, Mr. Ayer put on the brakes, for we were

going down hill, and stopped the horses. Ella hopped from the top of the wagon side into the road and went back for my cushion.

To Mr. Ayer's questions Amabel answered that we were still alive and still able to suffer. She did not know how long it would take two chairs to kill two women, but she thought not much longer. She was sure that Victor Hugo, when he had described the prowess of a cannon loose on a ship's deck, had never known what a chair loose in a cart could do. They were often balancing on two hind legs and satanically threatened to expel us over their backs. This was the worst thing they did, except when they gyrated on one leg. At such times we could only hold our breath and wish we had never come to North Carolina. Occasionally they would, for a half-mile or so, seem so

inoffensive and innocent, would stay so calmly down on their four legs, that we would gaze about us in an ecstasy of admiration of the near and far peaks, the slopes, the valleys, the gorges through which, mayhap, ran furious branches. I will be just, and record that many times those chairs behaved in such a soft, sweet manner that lambs would have seemed savage beside them. While we were yet absorbing with our eyes some lovely scene, Mr. Ayer would shout, "Take care now!" and bang, slide, bump, crack, charge, and retreat, would go the chairs and we with them, while we frantically tried to defend ourselves. Once at a particularly bad piece of road Amabel and I performed the gymnastic feat of getting out of the wagon that we might walk. Have I said that these wagons are built with two objects in view? First, that no

woman, or other being in petticoats, shall get into them ; second, that no such being, having entered, shall get out. And the vehicles fully accomplish the destiny for which they were manufactured. As we walked along behind, we saw the twins essay to occupy our vacant seats, and we saw each chair rear and fling out a twin as if each seat had been a catapult and each twin its corresponding projectile. The children appeared to be in the air a long time, but they alighted on the tailboard, and clung there until they had recovered breath and strength to climb in again.

It was in the very midst of the wildest dell we had ever traversed that, across a sharp opening, in the bottom of which foamed a stream, we saw smoke coming from a big chimney that was attached to

a cabin scarcely as large. The cabin stood on a steep incline. It looked as if a great hand had flung it up and it had happened to stick right there in the side of an immense mountain.

While we looked, a woman came out of the woods close to our cart. She had a gun on her shoulder ; a couple of rabbits, held by their hind feet, dangled from one hand.

As we gazed at her the twins sprang up in utmost excitement. They cried : —

“ Oh, Mr. Ayer, there’s Mo ! There’s Mo ! ”

Before Mr. Ayer could pull up the horses the children were out of the wagon and rushing violently at the person they had called “ Mo,” and who was their mother.

There was a pell-mell kind of a greeting between the three. The woman

turned a sunken, large-eyed face toward us and told Mr. Ayer that if he "war gwine over yon ter Ole Pink's she reckoned the young uns might walk there with her."

So we went on, while the woman and her daughters soon struck into the woods toward the cabin. It was during that walk that we think the particulars of the flight of the twins were arranged.

For the last hour we had noticed, as well as we could notice anything under the circumstances, that Ristus had been growing more and more sober, and had held the baby more and more close. Once he turned to Mr. Ayer and asked if "thur wa'n't no way fur him ter keep thur babby?" The gentleman shook his head.

Just as we were driving up to the cabin Ristus suddenly gave the little cadaverous thing a convulsive hug, rose in his place,

and handed the child to Amabel, saying huskily : —

“ I carn’t stay fur ter see it done.”

He leaped from the wagon and hurried into the woods. No one said anything.

The next moment Mr. Ayer had flung the lines on to the horses’ backs and stepped to the ground. As he did so, a long, red-bearded fellow appeared in the open door with a pipe clinched firmly between his teeth. He stared so hard he could not even say “ Howdy.”

When Mr. Ayer took the baby from Amabel’s arms, he said in a low voice that he should make “ short work of this job.”

Before he reached the door we saw in the dark background, behind the man, the face of Ole Pink peering forth.

Mr. Ayer had hardly entered before he came forth empty-armed. His face was hard and savage. He sprang in and

gave a vicious lash to the horses, who started on sharply. We heard high tones in the cabin. We looked back and saw Ole Pink rush out, the baby in one arm, while she shook the other hand at us, calling out something furiously. But our steeds were galloping away. She could not overtake us.

It was Mr. Ayer who spoke first, and in a deeply-moved voice : —

“ God knows it ’s a hard look-out for the child. But what could we do? I had made up my mind that Ristus should not bear that burden. I had to be almost harsh with him, too. He would take care of every helpless thing in the world if he could.”

It was a solemn drive home. Not half-a-dozen words were said all the time. At every curve in the way, at every

opening in the woods, I looked to see Ristus. But the boy did not appear. We tried not to feel anxious. We took up the twins about three miles from Ole Pink's. They were in the most riotous of spirits. Buster was missing, having gone with Ristus. Late in the evening, when we had ceased expecting, something scratched and whined at the door, which, being opened, admitted Buster. The dog turned and waited, whining a little. Presently Ristus, damp with the night fog, came into the rays from the fire. He took off his hat as he said that somehow he had n't the heart "ter stay down ter the ole hut 'thout thur babby." He said he "war that lonesome he felt like choking."

He was quickly drawn into the room, fed and warmed. He lay down before the hearth with Buster beside him.

It was only yesterday that Amabel first spoke to the boy about going back to the North with us when we go. His face flushed all red and then went pale in the way it has, while his eyes melted.

“You should have time to draw, and some one to teach you,” she said. “But you would be willing to work some for us, because, you see, we are not rich.”

He looked at her,

“Work for you!” he cried. He could not say another word; his glowing face was too tremulous. But no other word was needed.

Last night he was standing by the barn when I came upon him. The sun had set. Behind and above the Twin Brothers and all those peaks the sky was paling from its glory, while over in the east the deep amethyst was still upon Busbee and its greater kin. He was gazing adoringly.

At last he turned to where I stood, also looking at that pageant.

“Them mountings,” he said, “them glories. I could n’t leave ’em fur any-buddy but Miss Am’bel. I reckon I’d leave heaven fur her, an’ be happy er doin’ hit. An’ I sh’ll learn ter paint. An’ I sh’ll come back hyar an’ try ter paint all this,” he swept his hand round from east to west.

Faithful, loving soul ! If you fail it will not be because you have not aspired. You have “hitched your wagon to a star.”

THE END.



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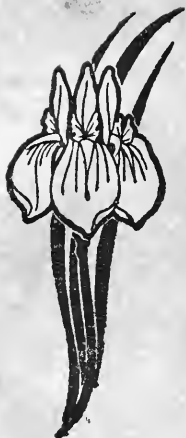


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